

winter violets in the spring by langolier

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen, NaNoWriMo

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-08

Updated: 2017-12-08

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:15:23

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 2

Words: 51,321

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Ruth 1:16

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

not mine, pls don't sue.

for eek

bad men

The floorboard creaks outside her bedroom and Nancy snaps awake with the words clear in her brain. She hasn't thought that way for years, the words are old and the meaning behind them smells like rotting woods and blood, feels like the cold headstone Barb finally got in the cemetery.

The bad men aren't in her life anymore, not the ones from her memories anyway. Now it's the ordinary bad in the one world, no other worlds to worry about.

But there's someone in her house.

She knows the bones of it now, the aches and pains that settle the house at night. The way the winter cold makes it groan more than the heat of the summer, the little rattle the screen door makes if the wind hits just right. She sleeps through those now, doesn't even stir.

This was different.

This was the wooden floorboard in the foyer, right before it leads you into the kitchen. It's been that way since before she moved in, she remembers it from the open house, had even liked the sound at the time. It reminded her of the bottom stair from her parents house, how it groaned if you landed on it right in the centre.

The floorboard is like that. It needs weight.

She's slid the covers back off to free her legs, keeping her eyes on the doorway, the dark hallway beyond. Her bat is leaning against the wall behind her nightstand, but the hairs on the back of her neck are standing up and she doesn't have time.

Moving quickly, she's off the bed in one smooth step, and trusting instinct she lunges through the doorway and into the body in her house. She'd lifted off her feet in the last second, needing the momentum to do what pure body weight couldn't and force him back a step.

And it was definitely a him. Her hammer punch connected solidly with the side of his neck and the grunt was distinctly male. Trying to keep him off balance, she shoved against his chest but he dodged her follow up left hook like he'd been expecting it and she had to wrench her arm free from his grip.

They're moving down the hallway, back toward the foyer and there's orange light filtering through the curtain from the porch light outside and for the first time Nancy gets a silhouette. She shoves her right arm straight out, forces the heel of her hand straight where his nose should be and though he moves at the last moment, there's a

satisfying thud that trembles up her arm when she lands against his cheekbone.

He's quick to recover but not fast enough to stop her glancing a kick against his shin and bringing him hard to the floor. She wanted to get closer to the front door, where the shotgun is tucked into the coat rack, but they're closer to the small table where she keeps the phone and there's flashlight in the drawer and a knife taped to the underside.

Kneeling heavy against the joints of his shoulders to keep him in place, Nancy grabs the leg of the table and yanks it toward her, the knife gets ripped from the underside and she's got it right against his throat. He stills immediately and it gives her the valuable second she needed to find the flashlight in the mess on the floor. She fumbles for the button and holds it in his face, speaking for the first time, her words hard and rough through the sleep still coating her throat.

"Move you asshole, I fucking dare you." And then the light is on and Jonathan is squinting up at her.

'Hi Nance.' The adrenaline leaves her system in a rush, she feels it go, her shoulders slump and the knife clatters to the floor. The tape is still on the handle, but her fingers are like ice now and she doesn't bother to try and pick it up again.

There's a bruise already forming on his face from where she got him in the cheek. It's purpling and swelling under the tender skin of his eye and she wants to feel bad about it but it's smothered under the mad and the sick feeling adrenaline left churning in her stomach. The words in her throat can't get out of her mouth, can't get past it, so she carefully levers herself off his shoulder and stands up. Bracing

a hand against the wall she waits for a second to make sure she's not going to puke, the after action has nausea twisting viciously.

It takes a second to be sure, but she's got it under control and starts walking toward the kitchen. Jonathan had made it to a half reclining position by the time she started down the hall so either he'd follow her, or she'd throw the bag of frozen peas back at him. Confident she'd done no lasting damage to his person, she didn't really care which he ended up doing.

Giving up on any further peaceful nighttime feelings, Nancy flicks the light switch on for the overhead lights in the kitchen. The fluorescents flicker, humming to life, and she scowls into the freezer. Grabs a bag of frozen peas from underneath the last piece of her mom's lasagne she was saving for a rainy day. When she closes the door, Jonathan is leaning against the counter beside her and she wishes she'd taken the opportunity to slam the freezer closed when she'd had the chance. If only to make herself feel better for a minute.

Still not speaking, she holds the peas out to him. He doesn't take them right away, just stands there, looking at her face with his eye still swelling and his hair cut shorter than she'd ever seen it. The condensation is starting to drip through her fingers so she gives up, pushes them against his chest and lets go, forcing him to uncross his arms and catch them.

Then she opens the fridge door and grabs a diet coke and the chocolate bar she hides next to the butter for emergencies. Ripping the wrapper off with her teeth, she sets the can down on the table and opens it one handed, bites into the chocolate bar with the other.

Tries to chew past the memory of how he used to tuck himself in

behind her shoulder blade whenever they walked anywhere, how he curled around her so she could fall back to sleep after nightmares. Swallows soda instead of wondering if the scar on his hand still lines up with hers, instead of thinking about the last time they saw each other.

He lifts the bag up to his face, wet spots left on his shirt from where it melted, and holds it against his left cheek so he's only looking at her with one eye. It's not much better.

'You okay?' he asks, one eyebrow lifted in question. Her shoulder aches a little, even as she shrugs, but it's nothing aspirin and six more hours of sleep wouldn't cure. He blocked most of her shots, never tried to land any himself. Which is an easy position to take when you break into the house of someone you know.

She shoves the last of the chocolate bar into her mouth and tries to convey as much with her face, the almost full body eye roll she levels at him. But still she doesn't talk.

'Mom says you're the local GP now,' his voice lifts up at the end slightly but it's said like a fact, like he knows for certain and is trying to make conversation. She's not feeling charitable enough to help him out. Not when she can close her eyes and still feel him dancing with her at the stupid Snow Ball after all the kids had left and they were supposed to be cleaning up.

The one who leaves doesn't get to demand anything from the one they left. Not information, not time, and certainly not willful trespass and minor breaking and entering.

‘Steve still Deputy Harrington?’ There’s a smile at the side of his mouth and it tugs at her, because it’s still so funny that Deputy Harrington is a reality. So wonderful that it fits so well. The part of her that’s not angry any more wishes she could share that with him.

It’s a small part though.

Despite that, she’s an adult now, a grown woman. She takes a fortifying drink of the coke, let’s the carbonation burn down her throat while Jonathan watches her steadily out of one eye.

‘Why are you here?’ He lowers the peas, reaches behind without looking to drop them into the sink. That hint of a smile has disappeared and Nancy has a horrible thought, something with Will, his mum- ‘did something happen?’ She asks it like a reflex and barely stops her free hand from reaching out to him, thinking the worst now but he’s already shaking his head.

‘No,’ he must see on her face where her mind has gone because he holds both hands out in front of himself and repeats, rock steady ‘no.’ And her shoulders relax. ‘Everyone’s fine.’ Her jaw pushes out again as her teeth clench, she can feel the anger simmering back to a boil at the base of her neck.

‘Then why are you here?’ Because if everyone’s fine and no bad has happened why the hell was he back from whatever Amazon he’d been hiking through this time. Back in her kitchen, back in her face.

‘I’m back.’ He shrugs when he says it and memories filter over her vision like a photo negative and goddammit she could just punch

him. She waits a full mississippi in case he has a follow up but when there's nothing but silence she sets the can down hard on the table.

‘That’s it?’ Free now, she crosses her arms tight across her chest. ‘You’re back.’ They want to shake so she tucks her hands further under her arms, squeezes herself tight and tries to keep it together.

Jonathan’s looking at her now like he used to, like he knows all her secrets, and she really would punch him now if she trusted her hands not to tremble. She needs him to leave.

‘I’ve got patients in the morning,’ Nancy manages to get the words out evenly, the tremble has moved to her chest now, inside, but luckily Jonathan is nodding.

‘Yeah,’ he shakes his head once, like he’s trying to clear it, and then straightens up from the counter, taps it once with his knuckles, “thanks for the peas.”

Nancy feels her mouth turn up at that, but luckily his back is toward her and he’s heading toward the front door. He has to pause to unlock it, and when he steps out onto the porch he turns, still holding the doorknob to meet her eyes over his shoulder. “It’s good to see you Nance,” he pulls the door closed between them but she can see the small smile on his face through the lace curtain on the window.

She watches him walk slowly down the walk back toward the car in the drive, black now, shiny and chrome, and he doesn’t look back until he’s opening the car door. He stands there, looking at the house for a minute, with the porch light washing an orangish hue over him,

before he climbs in, drives away.

Nancy stands there at the door, watching the taillights through the eyelets of the curtain and slowly slides the deadbolt home. When she can't see the red glow through the night fog anymore she gives in and leans her head against the door, closes her eyes tight and tries to breathe through slow and deep. Tries to stockpile resolve like sandbags against a flood.

Jonathan Byers was come back, and he had kept his key.

*

It's too much house for her, ask anyone. People told her all the time, when she first started calling the realtor about it, the butcher in the Piggly Wiggly who was the realtors brother, her parents, her nurse, her receptionist, everyone. At this point, Nancy had heard it from all of her family and the Jehovah's Witness.

She'd driven past it for the first time during Christmas break, Jonathan driving them back from skating. Will, Mike and El were squished into the back seat and they were humming along to the carol playing on the radio. It was one of El's favourites so she was the loudest. Last Christmas being belted out with much enthusiasm and little skill and Nancy couldn't help but sing along. It made Jonathan smile with his whole face so she'd let herself really lean into it, her and El serenading each other, hands outstretched through the space between the seats. El blew her a kiss and then started using her mitten as microphone to sing right into Mike's face. Nancy remembers the look on he'd worn, trying so hard to look annoyed and above it all but the blush along his cheeks betrayed him.

Jonathan takes the sharp turn away from loc mora slower than usual, mindful of black ice, and Nancy turned to look out the window just in time to see the house slip into view between the old hedgerows and the weeping willow now barren of leaves. It was old and visibly empty but some switch was flicked in her brain and that was it.

She checked the paper for sale notices, came up empty, and headed to the library. According to the census records in the back room she'd casually broken into during the Librarians lunch break, the house had to belong to the son of the recently deceased owner.

After that, she paid extra to have the Hawkins paper mailed to her in Chicago so she could keep an eye on it, and she saved.

For three long years, Nancy quietly and carefully put money aside.

It wasn't as hard as it could have been, schoolwork and residency shiftwork didn't leave much time for vacations and while she'd had a comfortable childhood she knew how to coupon and pinch pennies.

Jonathan had known. She never asked, but Nancy wouldn't have been surprised if he'd know that day in the car singing christmas carols. He never said anything, just sat with her in her tiny dorm room and clipped coupons from the newspapers. And the next Christmas, when the house was still there, no for sales sign out front, he'd given her a photo of it. It was framed and he'd done the film almost completely black and white but somehow he'd managed to keep the faded blue of the window flower boxes, the front door.

Nancy had hung it on the bookshelf over her desk at school, then on the window ledge in the kitchen of her tiny apartment near the

hospital. It was there when Dr.Sinclair asked her during thanksgiving dinner one year whether she'd be interested in settling back down in Hawkins when she was done in Chicago. Nancy nearly dropped the cup of punch she' d been drinking and she hadn't managed to hide her excitement so well, Dr.Sinclair had smiled and pointed her finger right Nancy's chest,

'Glad to hear it,' she'd said, and clipped away to the kitchen and started refreshing everyone's drinks.

'Not ready to retire yet,' Dr.Sinclair had later explained while they stood side by side at the sink washing and drying the dishes. 'But after twenty years, I'd like some help.' She passed Nancy the clean pot for drying and levelled her with a look. 'You strike me as a competent, ambitious woman, and while we'll do this proper and get your references, I get a good feeling about you and well, I tend to trust my feelings.' Nancy had never completed a business transaction over a kitchen sink with soap water in the handshake, but she too had a good feeling.

Jonathan had been so happy for her when she told him. Not wanting everyone to know right away, she'd dragged him to his car after dinner and the doors were barely closed before the words were rushing out of her mouth. 'Way to go Doc!' Were his exact words. And when he climbed in through her bedroom window the next morning he came in with the local Hawkins paper stretched out straight in front of him, open to real estate pages, and there was her house, on the market. 'Open house today,' was all he managed to say before she'd had him by the ears and pulled him half in through the window; kissing him hard and crushing the paper between them.

Seeing the house from the passenger seat of Jonathan's car was one thing. When she walked through the door the first time, her heart swooped in her chest. The parlour and dining room on the right with the stairs leading to the second floor hidden behind the bookshelf,

kitchen with it's huge farm sink and the wood burning stove that still worked tucked into the corner. Someone had removed the original glasswork above the front door and covered it over with wood panelling but she could fix that.

The second floor was the bedrooms, main washrooms and she wasn't sure, but it looked a dumbwaiter next to the stairs. Third floor was another bedroom, powder room, and then what had to have been the master and en suite, refinished circa 1959, on it's own at the other end of the hall.

The wallpaper was peeling in places, and the trim needed paint. At least seven of the windows needed replaced and she'd need a plumber to check out that en suite, definitely renovate the other power room next to the den on the first level.

But the bones were good, no cracks in the foundation, no leaks in the roof, no water damage or recent puddles in the basement.

The longer she stood in the entryway, looking at that terrible panelling someone had covered the original windowpane with, the more she could see it.

All of it.

Stained glass back over the front door the way it was meant to have, a sitting room for guests, boxes and maybe pots of flowers on the deck, a porch swing.

Jonathan had waited for her at the front door while she went to the basement, and she'd come up the stairs to see him leaning against the frame, looking out toward the weeping willow. Her heart had swooped again. They hadn't talked about it yet. She still had her residence to do, and Jonathan was applying to arts masters programs at NYU. Not that he'd told her that outright, but he'd left the brochure on the dash of his car and obviously Nancy had seen it.

So they hadn't talked about it.

But the newel post was smooth and sort of warm under her palm, from years of hands holding on to it, and Jonathan must have heard her footsteps because he was turning toward her, smile already on his face and the swooping of her heart was warm and gold and she could see it, just right.

*

The picture hangs over the antique love seat in her front room now, in what she still plans to be her parlour, or some sitting room, when she'd finished with it. The second floor bedrooms got a fresh coat of paint, but they're empty except for the one she keeps for guests. The third floor is the same as when she moved in, but for one corner in the master still covered with an old sheet.

She replaced the stained glass though. That was the first thing she did, after. She moved her things to the first floor den and then ripped out that old wood panelling. Set about designing the pattern for the glass. Nearly lost both her eyebrows to the blowtorch when she helped the glazier and the metalsmith frame it out, but made it away with only a light burn on her forehead.

There's a table in the kitchen, an iron bistro set she found at a yard sale, and she keeps a little cactus in a pot in its centre. Max had brought it back for her from a trip to LA. The bistro set has two matching iron chairs, Nancy uses one as a catchall for mail and magazines, sometimes she uses it as a footstool.

There's cable hooked up in the living room, next to the den, and she's had everyone over at some point or other crashing on her couch.

But it's only the light coming through the windows and catching dust motes in the air that makes her go upstairs. Open the window, air out the rooms, use the homemade lemon cleaner her mom makes to wipe down the window sills and the few bits of furniture never used.

And everyone still says, it's too much house for her.

Too much upkeep for just one person.

What does she do out there all by herself in that big old house?

Can you imagine the cleaning it needs, I could never.

What was she thinking, the big old thing, all that work.

Nancy plants annuals and perennials in the window boxes and she

hung a porch swing single handed, finds herself sitting out there when the evenings are warm and the sun is slow to set. Pushing herself back and forth with one toe on the ground, maybe a diet coke cold in her hands.

The willow blows in the breeze and if she closes her eyes she can hear the women from the grocery store in the sound of it's leaves, whispering to each other by the potatoes as she does her shopping.

Why did she want to live there, that big old house, all by herself?

When she's on her porch, with no one around but the willow and it's leaves, she thinks her answer into the breeze; and if a tear or two drag down her cheek when she says it, the willow, so far, keeps her secrets.

I didn't.

*

The coffee pot in the office needs at least ten minutes to percolate so Nancy always flicks it on right away when she gets in. They don't officially open until nine thirty but she likes to be the first one in. Rona always strides it right at nine, and Dr.Sinclair is a prompt quarter past, but Nancy likes the forty five minutes she can grab for herself when everything is quiet before the noise and commotion set in.

She spends that first ten minutes while the coffee drips into the pot doing a circuit of the office under the guise of watering the plants. There's never been any issue, but that doesn't stop her from checking the windows, the back door, the locks on the file cabinets that hold patient medical records. Salt lines tucked into duct tape to hid and keep them out of sight still in place. The coffee machine clicks off as she's pouring the last of the water into the ornamental lily sitting on the front desk.

She grabs a cup and takes it to the small desk in the back that her and Dr.Sinclair share when not seeing patients, sets it down carefully on the blotter. November is well underway, winter moving in steadily and she made the switch to her heavier jacket this morning when she saw the fog had turned to frost on the grass.

Killing time now, Nancy opens the appointment book and then closes it almost immediately. Tries taking a sip of the coffee she didn't really want anyway. It was her third cup, plus the diet coke from four am, and her system was jangling. She opens the appointment book again and manages to make notes on the first two patients in her schedule before tossing the pencil down and and resting her head on the back of the chair.

She imagined placing solid white bricks one on top of the other, making her breathing slow and deep she kept her eyes closed, tried to place them in front of the images that kept trying to flash behind her eyelids. Building a wall between her right now and the memory of Jonathan in her kitchen, in her hallway, under her hands.

Her knees bounced with nervous energy under the desk and she could feel the caffeine and anxiety try to tighten bands around her chest. She had maybe an hour to get herself together. She didn't even know why she bothered coming in so much earlier today but

after she'd righted the hallway table, reset the phone in the cradle and retaped the knife beneath it, she'd found herself standing at the entrance to her kitchen staring at the counter and the slowing defrosting peas in the sink.

It was too early to call anyone, and who would she call, what would she even say?

So Jonathan was back, she couldn't let it affect her.

He said he was back but who knew for how long. He'd been back before, she knew he'd visited his mum, Will when he was on semester break. And there had been Christmases, of course. But she'd always been away then, or he'd flown right out again, sometimes on the red eye right after Christmas dinner, so it was as if he hadn't really been there. Certainly never in her kitchen, although he must have still had the key then.

And there was a road she didn't want to go down so she'd had to get out of the house. If she'd stood in her hallway any longer she'd have started screaming, or worse, crying.

She tried to get into a better position in the chair, so her neck wasn't on an angle so much, smoothed her hands out on her thighs to try and stop her legs from twitching. Half an hour now, probably, she had half an hour before Rona breezed in. She could get it together before then, just keep placing white bricks next to white bricks until they blocked out the shape of Jonathan's face.

It felt like no more than a minute, but the chime over the door rang

out and Nancy jerked awake from a doze and nearly knocked the cup off the desk in her instinctive swing up from the chair to see Rona breezing in, just as predicted.

‘You done the coffee Nancy? I’m dying for one’ She called out while opening the blinds at the front window. Nancy ran her hands quickly through her hair, over her face to make sure she hadn’t drooled and called back out an affirmative, went to grab her doctor coat from the hooks by the exam rooms and went to work.

*

By the time two o’clock rolled around Nancy had seen four cases of chickenpox, all from the same grade three class, two vaccination appointments, one walk in who needed a prescription for birth control and one toddler with a jewellery bead stuck up his nose. She had two more annual physicals in the afternoon but for the next hour she was free.

Grabbing her coat, Nancy ducked her head into the small room they used for supplies where Rona was re stocking exam room kits,

‘I’m popping out, you want anything?’ Rona shoved one of the many pins valiantly holding up her miles of curling hair back into place and shook her head

‘Don’t tempt me Nancy, you know I’m trying to cut back.’ Nancy smiled and held up her hands in surrender,

‘Alright alright, just trying to be polite,’ checking the clock on the wall again out of habit, ‘I’ve got the two annuals back to back in an hour but Doc should be free for walk ins if any come through’ Now it was Rona’s raising her hands, a quick shooing motion,

‘Go get lunch, we’ll manage,’ Nancy tossed out a wave and starting walking to the door, ‘but if a chocolate cruller finds its way onto my

desk , ' it hangs in the air and the laughter that follows carries her out to the street.

The frost had thawed now, the sun having melted it away by mid morning no doubt, but the air was still cold and she could feel it bite into her face and ears as she jaywalked across to the dinner. She'd missed the lunch rush so she had three coffees balanced in a tray one handed and the contraband cruller tucked into a bag with her own lunch in the other.

A few people, well bundled against the new cold, passed her on the sidewalk, stood patiently with her at the crosswalk. She was in sight of the police station now and figured why tempt fate. Flo gave her a quick nod as she nudged the door open with her shoulder, nodding her head toward the bullpen.

Nancy made a quick pitstop by Hopper's office. On the phone when she entered, he nodded at her distractedly while she placed a coffee down at his elbow.

Deputy S's desk was empty but Steve's was occupied, Deputy Harrington making notes in his little black book, nodding in response to whatever he was being told.

'Absolutely Mrs. Lewynski, I'll swing by and check it out, thanks for calling.' Nancy came around to the front of his desk, taking up the empty chair there as he ended the call.

Setting the tray of coffees down between them, Steve picked his out of the tray before it even fully rested on the desk. Leaning back heavily in his chair, they both kicked their feet up onto adjacent corners of the desk. Nancy reached into one of the bags and bit right

into the muffin top like an apple, not even bothering to peel the paper off the stump.

Steve broke his muffin in half and then quartered it again, he had the portion almost into his mouth when he shot her a look over it and said, all innocence,

‘Did you hear the news? ‘ Eyebrows winging up on his face, the one with the scar running through it made it look like an exclamation point, ‘ Jonathan Byers, back from the jungle.’

Nancy only scowled and took another bite from the muffin. Exhaling with a little dip of his chin he settled further back into the chair. ‘Yeah, ‘ he spoke around the muffin, ‘ I figured.’

He gives her a full fifteen minutes, then simply meets her eyes over the rim of his coffee cup and she’s spilling her guts like he knows she’s been dying to do all morning.

‘ He fucking broke into my house this morning,’ she grits out in a whisper, still mindful of curious ears, ‘I nearly stabbed him.’ Steve spit takes into his cup but recovers, stifles the laughter quickly and clears his throat, all solicitude.

‘Took you by surprise, I imagine,’ the delivery is so bland Nancy nearly rolls her eyes but she’s reliving it all now and the anger is popping in her blood.

‘Who does he think he is?’ her voice still low and harsh.

‘You didn’t *actually* stab him, did you?’ Steve has to ask.

‘Of course not,’ slightly affronted, like she’d just go around stabbing people, ‘ I just punched him.’ Relief that he wouldn’t have to go round to the Byers’ and find Jonathan having bled out on his mother’s couch settled Steve’s shoulder and he finishes off his own muffin.

‘How’d he get in?’ coming back around to the details. Now Nancy hesitated, just for a second, before mumbling into her cup and Steve does a double take, ‘did you just say he used his key?’ His voice has picked up at the end and Nancy shot him a slightly panicked look, eyes darting back to Flo and the open door of Hopper’s office. ‘Sorry,’ voice carefully low again, ‘ Nancy, he has a key? Why does he have a key to your house,’ Steve sets his coffee down, need both hands free to run through his hair, ‘how does he have a key?’

Nancy avoided eye contact, becoming very interested in the crumbs at the edge of the desk left over from her muffin. She pushes them gently into a small pile, then into a narrow line, then back into a pile.

She’d managed to avoid this exact scenario for years and now Jonathan was back and ruining all her careful plans of taking information to her deathbed. ‘Nancy.’ Steve prompts her and the look she shoots him is straight out of junior year,

‘The realtor mailed it to him,’ Steve still looks confused, like she said it in Spanish, ‘it’s his house too.’

Steve blinks twice, slow, deliberate, before resting his forearms on the desk and leaning toward her,

‘What the actual shit,’ comes out completely deadpan, ‘how,’ he presses his palms flat together and lifts them up and down, ‘how is this the first time I’m hearing about this?’ It seems mostly rhetorical so Nancy just keeps sipping her coffee. ‘How,’ he repeats, dragging it out, ‘in Hawkins, did I not know about this?’

Not wanting him to feel like it was a deliberate falsehood, Nancy shrugs her shoulders,

‘No one knows.’ Steve spreads his palms now in wordless question, ‘the realtor wasn’t local, mine wasn’t either, and then I just didn’t tell anyone.’ He doesn’t look satisfied with that at all so she finds her spine and gives a little more. ‘It happened right before,’ she takes a deep breath, ‘and then I didn’t want to talk about it, after.’ She looks at his face, ‘I didn’t want to think about it.’ Cup empty now she starts to fold the rim down, ‘He wasn’t around, made it easier not to think about it. Not easy,’ steadier now she could meet his gaze, ‘but easier.’

She can see the understanding on his face before he starts to nod his head and it lifts a little of the weight. It hadn’t been her intention to make it this dark, heavy thing, but that’s what it had turned into and it had lessened a little, with the telling.

‘So what’s the plan?’ His eyebrows are raised again, but it’s patience now, instead of incredulous surprise.

The clock says she's got twenty minutes before her first annual of the afternoon, and for the first time in seven years she doesn't know what she's going to find when she gets home, doesn't know what she wants to find.

'Fucked if I know.'

*

After everything, well, after everything the second time, Nancy spent a lot of time with Barb.

Buried under blaming herself, and Steve, and herself even more, and trying to keep the secret without cracking, hadn't left a lot of room for closure. Years of higher education, medical school and a few therapy sessions had clarified that for her now, but at the time? At the the time she'd missed her friend so badly she'd felt sick with it.

When she finally had a headstone to go to, to grieve next too, she'd visited a lot. Fresh flowers every week, a wreath at Christmas, something stupid and frivolous at Valentines. A candle for birthdays.

By the time she had to leave for college, the only thing she saw more regularly than her own family and Jonathan, was Barb's headstone.

If she had spare period in the afternoon, Jonathan would often pick

her up from the cemetery. It got to the point where he'd swing by there on the weekend on his way to her house, catching her there more often than at home.

When he left for freshman year Nancy felt his absence like a physical thing, filled the void with studying next to Barb instead. When she had to leave for her own freshman year, it was like she was abandoning Barb all over again.

She learned, with therapy and a little distance, that it really wasn't the same thing at all, but it had sure felt that way at the time.

Her first year of residence had taken over her life like everyone had said it would and when she finally came up for air and looked at her calendar she realized it had been nine months since she'd visited Barb. She'd borrowed a friend's car and driven straight home after a fifth consecutive twelve hour shift, she could have fallen asleep at the wheel, killed somebody, killed herself; but the panic attack had gripped her throat so tight she didn't take a full breath until she passed the Hawkins town limits.

Two am found her kneeling in the cemetery, still in her scrubs, with tears rolling silently down her face.

There were wildflowers resting in the little wire vase; dandelions, forget me nots and shrinking violets with their roots still attached.

She'd known immediately that Jonathan had left them, had thought to come and check on Barb when she couldn't.

Nancy had driven straight back to Chicago and booked an appointment with the hospital psychologist.

*

At five thirty Nancy did her evening round of the office, turned off the lights, closed the blinds, and locked the door behind her. She'd made Rona and the Doc go home after the last walk in at four thirty, feigning paperwork she needed to get to but really, trying to delay her drive home just a little bit longer.

Even going through and making notes on today's patients, tomorrow's patients; two regulars in the morning and one in the afternoon, hadn't stretched her an hour past when she waved the two of them out the door. No busy work left to do, Nancy mentally squared her shoulders and put on her coat.

The steering wheel was cold to the touch so she reached into her glove compartment for the spare mittens she kept tucked next to a small emergency flashlight and a medium sized hunting knife. The heater always took a few blocks to kick in so her breath fogged around inside the car until she'd pulled onto main street.

She kept the radio low, humming along with Annie Lennox as she passed the police station, the funeral home, took the sharp left out of town through the suburbs where she grew up.

It wasn't procrastinating, not really, she was just taking the scenic

route, through the neighbourhood, that she saw everyday.

Nancy rolled her eyes at herself even as she turned the wheel in the opposite direction of her house.

Barb had been in and out of her mind all day and she should really swing by and clear out the old flowers from the few weeks before. The frost this morning would have finished them off for sure.

Pulling her car through the gate, Nancy took the farthest spot next to the tree at the fence, backed the car in carefully even though every spot was empty. Grabbing the flashlight at the last second she tucked her purse under the seat and locked the door; left the knife in the car.

It was overkill, even for her, to carry it with her the scant fifty meters into the field.

November had set in dark and deep and the sun was barely an orange smudge under the horizon, the small beam from her flashlight the only light pollution now that her back was to the road. She probably could have found the headstone with her eyes closed, but this seemed smarter.

The wind picked up as she came up to the plot, slid itself under her collar as the light washed over the engraved letters and settled on the clutch of grocery store daisies tucked into the frame.

She'd started to kneel and the cheerful flowers fresh in their cheap

green paper had her sitting down hard on the ground instead.

‘Hey Barb,’ she reached a hand out to touch one of the flowers, ‘had a visitor already today huh?’ Shrugging she wrapped her arms around herself, trying to keep her hands warm, keep them from reaching out again.

‘Before you ask, no, I don’t know what I’m going to do.’ Nancy had the flashlight balanced between her knees so it spotlighted Barbs name, her birthday, the short epitaph her mom had wanted.

he who does not gather with me, scatters

Her ears started to throb and she became very aware of the tip of her nose, but Nancy didn’t move. Let the cold seep from the ground through her pants, stared at the flowers in the frame.

Something shuddered in her chest that could have been from the cold, she hoped it was from the cold, and not from a fissure in the hard coating around her heart. He’d brought Barb flowers, cleaned away the old ones, and he’d been back less than twenty four hours. God knows the damage he could do if he actually sticks around. Which he won’t, she tells herself, he won’t, he won’t. But still she stared.

‘What the hell am I supposed to do now?’

She sat with Barb until even sticking her hands in her armpits

couldn't keep them warm. Her legs had gone stiff and when she levered herself back to standing, the rush of blood back to the limbs sent pins and needles spreading down to her toes. The small headrush from standing had blood buzzing in her ears, so loud for a second it sounded like it was coming from the trees.

Pressing a kiss to her frozen fingers she laid it on the top of the stone and started the awkward walk back down the path to her car, careful to keep her eyes focused on the few feet in front of her.

It didn't happen often anymore, but certain smells, or the way a shadow fell on the ground, a tree, and Nancy remembered the Upside Down so clearly it was like she'd crossed over.

Knowing it was PTSD didn't make it stop, so she took extra care now, avoided the one diner downtown with the really good milkshakes because the grease when it burned on the stovetop had a weird chemical undertone that triggered her hindbrain.

She hadn't been there since senior year when the panic had hit her so fast she hadn't been able to suck in a breath, had run from the booth and into the street with her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

So when the tree branches over the car creaked in the breeze, Nancy kept her head down and unlocked the door, slid into the driver seat without lifting her eyes. The engine turned over and Cindi Lauper crooned out low from the radio.

Hunger had started to claw at her now so avoidance wasn't an option, and killing time was going to work against her now. The

frozen lasagna in her freezer was going to have to do for dinner.

Nerves jangled as she pulled up the driveway and when she stopped in front of her dark, quiet house, had to take a minute to rest her head on the steering wheel between her hands until the tidal wave of feeling ebbed away.

Unlocking the door and turning on the light, Nancy hung up her coat, secured the deadbolt and reminded herself this is what she'd wanted all day. Stepping out of her low professional heels, she went straight to the stove and set it to preheat, grabbed the casserole dish of lasagna from the freezer and centered it on the rack, uncovered. Setting the timer, she left the hood light on and walked upstairs.

She tugged the small beaded chain on the antique floor lamp on the second floor landing and washed the hallway with old dim light, started up to the third floor before she could think herself out of it.

There was only hallway light on this level, no decorative lamps, so she flicked it and made herself turn toward the empty master room. The single bulb hanging from the ceiling sputtered to life when she laid her hand over the lightswitch on the wall just inside the room, but she stood in the doorway for a minute.

The floors were old hardwood, they'd been stripped of varnish and lightly sanded by the previous owner before the sale. She hadn't been able to decide what stain to go with, before, so they retained their natural wood colour.

There was no furniture in the room.

In the far left side, under the bay window, was an old striped bedsheet. Nancy was pretty sure it came from Mike's childhood bedroom. Misshapen by lumps underneath it, the pale green and white lines zig zagged their way to the floor.

She had twenty minutes before the lasagna would be ready, she just had to make it through twenty minutes.

Gripping the bottom of the sheet with both hands she lifted and pulled simultaneously. Bundling the sheet up into a careless ball Nancy dropped it unceremoniously onto the floor behind her, sat with crossed legs on the floor and pulled the closes of the cardboard boxes toward her. It read 'Jonathans room' in slanted uneven cursive.

The top of the box folded into itself to close so Nancy carefully unpaired the two sides and revealed neatly packed records, some with their covers so well cared for they looked new, others so well loved the edges were fraying. Leaning one arm on the corner of the box, she rested her head in her hand and carefully went through, reading each cover.

Led Zepplin, cover bright red and shining, The Clash with it's cover frayed and faded almost beyond recognition. She lingered there a little while, fingernail tugging lightly on the corner, before shaking her head and pushing the box aside.

The next box said 'camera' but there were easily parts for three inside, next to the two actual camera's. The one she recognized immediately as the one Steve had dropped in the parking lot, she

lifted it carefully but something still rattled on the inside. Nancy set it down just as carefully. The second had been a gift from his mom and Hopper, his third year at university, right before he'd started looking at Masters programs in New York.

There were catridges and different lenses, all meticulously packed into their own boxes. Nancy slid that one away with greater care than the first.

No label on the next box, it must be written on the other side, but this one was filled with framed photographs, knickknacks from his old room at home, she recognized a few things from his dorm room.

There was an old photo of him with Will and his mom, he couldn't have been more than twelve in it, Will no more than 8, but Will was in the centre. His arms draped around his brother neck, his mom's shoulders, made the three of them a unit.

She made it through three more boxes, more knick knacks, some clothes, a whole box of textbooks from university.

The smell of lasagna had started to waft up through the house, Nancy figured she had time to go through one more box and pulled the one from way back in the corner. The writing was so faded and fine on this one, done in pen rather than marker like the others, that she could only sort of making out the letters. It was taped sealed unlike the others as well, but she thought it might have said 'photos'.

Expecting another box of framed portraits, she peeled back the brown packing tape and found reams of negatives in small individual reels,

and slim grey folders. Not wanting to risk damaging the negatives, Nancy reach for one of the folders and, using both hands, peeked inside to make sure it wasn't more delicate undeveloped film.

It wasn't.

The first print, because the folder held developed photos on their thick paper, was Dustin and Steve matching hair and matching grins mugging for the camera. Dustin had a dark gown over this clothes, so it must have been his graduation.

Flipping through, Nancy found a whole timeline. There was Will in his Ghostbuster costume, Steve in his graduation cap and gown with her standing next to him, both of them making finger guns at the camera and smiling.

She found one of his mom standing at the kitchen counter with Christmas all around, she was wearing a green sweater and the light caught on the gold of her necklace, everything about her glowed.

There were hundreds of them, loose prints in colour, black and white, a few experimental aged patinas. Nancy shuffled carefully through landscapes, still life, group shots that came out blurred because someone had moved at the last second.

In one of the folders that had slipped under the cartridges to become trapped on the bottom Nancy found a candid shot of herself, no more than twenty, sitting on the hood of Jonathans car. She was laughing and looking out of frame, like maybe Jonathan had tried to set the timer and hadn't made it back to the car in time. Just the sleeve of

his jacket, one hand, had made it into the left side of the shot.

It couldn't have been later than third year university, her hair was long and she hadn't cut it short again until she moved into the house.

Easier to put it into a ponytail for hospital rounds, stick it under a sterile cap if she needed to. Hadn't needed that practicality when she started at the clinic, so she'd indulged herself again and cut it above her shoulders, nice and close to her ears. She liked the way it framed her face, now, older and with slightly more wear.

But it was long and fighting to curl madly in the photo, like it did when she'd spent an hour drying to blow it out only to get caught in the rain.

Had it rained that day? She studied the details of the photo, tried to place the exact day in her memories. She'd sat on Jonathan's car countless times, the blue jacket could have been any in the string of blue jackets she'd owned in the last ten years. Jonathan had owned the same brown jacket until New York, he may own it still. It might even be in one of these boxes, she cast a quick glance at the half dozen boxes she hadn't even gone into, she doubts he would have needed it in the jungle.

Her fingers held the edges of the photo still, index fingers running lightly back and forth, and she tried to put herself back into that day when she'd looked so happy, she could almost hear her own laughter from the look on her face at what was surely Jonathan running back to her.

The oven timer buzzed in the kitchen and if she jumped a little and hastily put the box back in order, no one saw her anyway.

*

It took ten days before she saw Jonathan again.

She hadn't been counting, not exactly, but she had patients, appointments, obligations. She had a busy life that required her to notice the passage of time. It didn't help that she saw Steve almost every day and he'd started a small tally in the upper right corner of his desk calendar on the third day. He tried to hide it from her initially but by day eight when she placed the coffee on his desk during his phone call, he made direct eye contact with her while he scratched out a line with his pencil, managed to keep the bead of his conversation going with Mrs . Lewinsky again all the while.

He hadn't outright told her to stop avoiding the situation, not exactly, but he hadn't *not* told her. And every time he didn't bring it up, Nancy had the same response, she wasn't going to go out of her way and disrupt her life for someone who would probably be gone the next day.

The more ticks that accumulated on Steve's calendar, the less that argument held up, but Nancy was already prepared to take other secret parts of her life to the grave, she wasn't about to cave after just over a week.

In the end, it was taken completely out of her hands. She supposed someone could have contrived to short out the bulb in her second floor lamp at the same time Mrs Byers dining room light went out but she couldn't see the government caring that much about her personal life to intervene. The universe had watched her walk out of the front

door in her house work clothes and seen an opportunity.

Hawkins boasted two white tablecloth restaurants, three gas stations and two grocers, but the closest Home Depot was over in Fort Wayne and Nancy was not about to drive half an hour out of town on a Saturday morning for a single light bulb.

The local hardware, two blocks down and over from the funeral home where it had been for almost eighty years, would have to have what she needed.

Cheerful bells chimed over the door as she walked in. Tossing a nod to Dave behind the counter, Nancy went straight to the back wall and crouched down, starting scanning the drawers of boxed light bulbs.

The lamp was a Tiffany reproduction she'd found at an estate sale for a song, and it needed the smaller forty watt bulb. She knew Dave kept some of them, unpopular as they were, it was just a matter of pulling out the right drawer. The door chimed again as she sifted through the next drawer.

Nancy moved steadily down the wall, shuffled backward a half step when the latest drawer held only sixty watts and backed right into a shelf. Straightening up in surprise, she ended up right next to Jonathan, not the shelf she was expecting.

He was smiling at her in the old way, just a shadow of it around his mouth and his eyes angled up in the corners. He had two bulb boxes balanced in one hand and she tried to clear the surprise from her face, tried to remember if she'd brushed her teeth that morning.

Instinctively, she wanted to smile back at him, what was seven years absence against saving the world with someone, but her heart shuddered and she didn't give in; cleared her throat instead.

'Repairs?' She asked, nodding toward the bulbs. Following her gaze, Jonathan held up the boxes as he shrugged.

'Dining room light went out,' a furrow shows up between his eyebrows, 'you too?'

'No,' she shakes her head and answers at the same time, feeling foolish and wishing she didn't, 'a lamp.'

'The one from the garage sale?'

'Estate sale,' she corrects immediately and his eyes smile at her again.

'Sure.' Crouching down to get eye level the with drawers he looks up at her, 'what size?' Nancy reluctantly pulls the burnt out bulb from her jacket pocket and holds it out so he can read the label. So this was happening.

She lowers herself to a knee beside him while he started searching the drawer immediately in front of them. It's three columns wide so Nancy works through the furthest to the left.

It takes them a few minutes of working in silence before they meet with success, each holding a small box.

Standing in unison, Jonathan holds the spare out to her and she pockets the old bulb, carries a new in each hand toward the cash.

‘Thanks,’ she offers.

‘No problem,’ he says it like it’s true, like there’s no problem between them, no thing practically leaning over both their shoulders as they pay Dave for the bulbs. It follows them out through the door with it’s cheerful chime and lingers with them on the sidewalk.

They’d parked next to each other in the spots right in front of the store, but she’d backed into hers and the driver side doors were parallel. Nancy resisted the urge to roll her eyes skyward, even the thing on their shoulders wanted to snicker.

Standing on the curb, neither of them made a move to go open their door first. Nancy had just resigned herself to shoot first when Jonathan’s keys jingled in his hand as he turned toward her fully. Casually leaning back against the front of his car, setting the bulbs down on the hood.

‘How’s the house?’ He looked out into the street and back before meeting her eyes. The wind had caught his hair and pushed it forward, but it didn’t get into eyes like it would have before, just twisted and went diagonally across his forehead. She wasn’t used to being able to see so much of his face.

‘Fine,’ it came out more defensive than she’d intended but she couldn’t take it back. ‘It’s fine,’ she tried again, softening her tone slightly. Jonathan nodded and tucked his hands in his pockets. He looked out into the street, a long scan down from the crosswalk back to shopfront and up to her face. The collar of his coat shifted with the movement and drew her attention briefly before she reigned it back.

She’d stayed with one foot on the curb, having stopped mid stride when he moved first, and it forced him to tilt his head back to look at her straight on. There was a heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach at the way his jaw was set. Nancy felt the adrenaline start to burn in her system even as the words left his mouth.

‘Want help with it?’ There was a buzzing in her ears and the pit of her stomach became a void, at the bottom of it was the memory of him standing in the doorway of her house looking out at the willows.

She came so close to tipping into it that her leg moved and she had to recover by stepping down from the curb and mirroring his pose against her own car.

‘Help?’ Her voice didn’t croak, thank god, but there was something in her throat and she needed to swallow hard against it.

‘If you do, you know where to find me.’ He moved now, grabbing the bulbs from the hood and opening the driver's door, he hadn’t bothered to lock the car.

She hadn’t moved, had been afraid it would crack something vital,

but the skepticism must have radiated from her like a wave because he turned back toward her as he slid into the seat.

‘It’s a great house.’ The smile lived at the side of his mouth again. It was small and barely there but for when you looked at his eyes, and the words were warm so it was like they hung, suspended in the air. She heard him back out of the space, rev the car into gear and pull onto the street, but didn’t watch.

Her eyes had settled on a spot in the middle distance and she kept them there until her heartbeat had evened out, until she’d visualized the words floating to the ground into the puddle by her shoes. When she could breath easily past whatever had lodged itself in her throat, Nancy let her eyes close and her chin tilt down toward her chest for a whole three seconds.

When she reached the three count in her head she opened her eyes and let the wind dry out the moisture that had gathered in the corners. She unlocked the car door and set the bulbs on the passenger seat, pushed the hair she hadn’t bothered to brush that morning out of her face.

Keeping her mind blank the whole drive home, when she pulled into the drive she turned the car off and just sat with her hands on the steering wheel; looking at her house.

The window boxes were a warm deep blue, the front door too, both complementary shades that tied in with the stained glass. Sun was catching on it now, lighting it up, and even with the window boxes empty for winter it was so close to the image she’d held in her heart for it from the first time she’d seen it.

It had been no more than a barely there glimpse from a moving car but she'd seen it, what it had in its heart.

It was a great house.

She locked the car, replaced the bulb in the lamp, stored the spare, and resolutely did not look near the third floor staircase. She pulled the chain on the lamp and stood on the second floor landing, told herself 'help' was the last thing she wanted.

*

In the nightmares, there are never any birds. It's the silence, moreso even than the lack of sun, that has her heart spiking against her breastbone. It's dark, shivering cold, and the air is wrong - but it's the vacuum of sound that has fear sweat popping up on her temples, her throat.

Sometimes she knows it's a dream and can force herself awake, stands in place and lets her hands fist at her sides, pushes herself into consciousness until she's gasping awake staring up at the ceiling of the den.

Nancy worries about those episodes less, pushes them out of her mind like she changes out of her damp sleepshirt into a clean one and wills herself back to dreamless sleep.

It's when she can't tell, when she's seventeen again and trapped, that things go sideways. She stopped keeping the gun in her room after she came out of the nightmare bolt upright in bed, aiming the shotgun at the mirror on the opposite wall.

So the shotgun stayed at the front door, the knife stayed in the hallway, and the bat she had to lean out of bed for.

This time, when she woke up screaming with tears on her face and her throat hurting, the flood of relief had her crying all over again. Hunched over with the blankets tangled around her legs, Nancy pressed her burning face into the cool space of the comforter by her knee.

Head feeling like it had been stuffed with cotton, she waited until her breathing had evened out, the hiccupping sobs subsiding into shortened tremors around her ribs. Using the bottom of her shirt, Nancy mopped up the mess of her face. She'd need to change, the shoulders of the shirt were damp and she'd sweated through the back, but she needed water first.

The saliva in her mouth had all but dried up and when she tried to swallow it was like sand had coated her throat and it burned all the way down.

She tugged on the chain of the lamp on her nighttable, a holdover from her dorm room, before crawling out of bed. Nancy turned on every light on her way down the hall to the kitchen.

The light in the hood vent over the stovetop flickered to life as she

ran a glass under the tap. She drank the first in one go and refilled it, held the cool glass against her forehead in between sips.

Pieces of the nightmare were already disappearing the way normal dreams do, but she could still feel the cold choking her when she closed her eyes, like she'd been drowning again this time too.

Lungs shuddering a little on the exhale, she tried deep breathing past the panic that started to curl up around her neck again.

No bad had happened, she reminded herself, no bad had happened and she was fine in her house. In her kitchen with the tiny working wood stove in corner, and the stained glass over the door. There were no monsters here.

Chilled now from the damp shirt and the void of adrenaline in her system, Nancy walked back to the den and pulled open door to the bachelor chest she used as a bureau. Another find from the estate sale, the ornate brass handles were cool to the touch. There was an old ragged waffle shirt buried in the back under her three pairs of woolen socks and she pulled it out from underneath them, dragged it over her head to replace the grey tshirt she'd already tossed onto the floor. She'd deal with it in the morning, later in the morning.

Crawling into the opposite side of the bed, she left the light burning and tried to close her eyes for longer than fifteen seconds at a time. Then thirty seconds. She tried to build her wall of white bricks but every time she managed to get the height up to three rows she was back in the parking lot with Jonathan in the weak winter sunlight.

It had caught on the edge of his zipper on the collar of his jacket and she remembered having to pull herself back from staring at it. Reliving it now, in the thirty second increments she managed to keep her eyes closed, she realized it hadn't been the zipper that had distracted her, not really.

She'd processed it now, the way anxiety hadn't let her at the time, and she couldn't explain why, with the sun hitting him directly, there'd still been a shadow on his neck.

Rising out from the stark white of his t shirt she'd mistaken it for the edge of his collar blocking the sun.

The scar on her palm throbbed once, a phantom pain that was all in her mind, and she gave up with the bricks and just stared hard at the ceiling.

Jonathan had an active job, it took him all over the world, into places where someone could easily get bruises just going into work. National Geographic covered all sorts of stories and she knew he'd gone to dangerous places, situations, for his work.

It could easily be from that.

Nancy traced the edges of the ceiling medallion with her eyes, followed the curling design around it's light socket and couldn't explain why she knew, deep in the hollow space under ribs, that it wasn't.

He might have been on a job when it happened, but it hadn't been the job to give it to him.

Something had found him, out there in the jungle. Maybe it had been something real, something known, but she traced the pattern of fleur des lis over her head, and wondered.

Wondered if something found him like something found Barb, or Will.

Her body gave in and drifted down and out to a fitful sleep, but her dreams were cold and filled with monsters, and when she screamed Jonathan's name he never answered.

*

Nancy had it all planned out. She'd put on makeup, covered up most of the damage leftover from her night before, and spent the morning making two casseroles. While she waited for the oven to ding, she'd dealt with the tile in the second floor bath. The eye watering orange tiles were chipped more places than they were whole and the dirty work of hammering the tiles from the wall with the spackle helped her focus.

She should go right to Hopper, but in the light of day she wasn't so willing to lean wholly on gut instinct. If she overreacted and it turned out Jonathan actually did just trip over a tree root somewhere in the rain forest? Well, she didn't think she could come all the way back from that.

Better safe than sorry, she thought viciously, chipping a particularly stubborn tile off the backsplash above the sink.

Casseroles done, one went covered into the fridge for the week while the other, baked in one of her mother's guest dishes with the matching lid, was wrapped carefully in a dishtowel and placed in a spare canvas grocery bag.

Twisting her hair into some form of style, Nancy checked that no tile dust still lived under her nails and then grabbed her keys and the canvas bag in one hand.

She drove along Mirkwood, it really was the fastest way despite how irksome she still found the forest, but if her foot lay heavier on the gas until she made the turn onto their street none of the deputies were there to call her on it.

Pulling up to the house, she noticed Jonathan's car right away, but the green gremlin was nowhere to be seen and her careful planning received its first hitch.

Recovering quickly, Nancy schooled a neutral expression onto her face as Jonathan opened the front door, like he'd been expecting her. Or had seen her through the kitchen window.

'For your mum,' she says quickly before he can speak first, holding the canvas bag in both hands. He moves out of the doorway, stepping back and off to the side so she can walk straight through to

the kitchen. 'Is she around?'

At home in the kitchen, Nancy sets the bag on the counter and carefully lifts the dish out and onto the kitchen table. Having closed the front door behind her, Jonathan stepped into the kitchen as she was unwrapping the dishtowel and tossing it back into the bag.

'She's gone to Chicago with Hopper, they're visiting El and Mike this weekend,' he looks at her curiously, 'didn't Mike tell you?' He had, but she'd forgotten and Nancy has to snap her gaze back up from his collar where it had drifted at his question.

Now that she was in, the subtle obfuscation of having come to see his mum, went right out the window. Nancy had always been more shoot first.

'A tree give you that?' dropping all pretense, she lifted her hand and tapped against her own collarbone while her chin pointed directly at what was definitely not a shadow on his throat.

Friendly curiosity dropped from his face like rock into a pond and she had her answer.

Her palm throbbed along the scar once and before she knew it she had stepped toward him and tugged at the shoulder of his shirt, pulled it hard to the right.

She must have surprised him because he didn't raise his hand to pull

the shirt back into place and she'd already seen that the bruising carried solidly over his collarbone and likely down his chest. A sore black colour tinged with purple at the edges.

'Well?' She stayed immediately in front of him, caging him between the kitchen table and the wall. If he wanted out he'd have to physically move her. She half wanted him to try it.

'You know it's not,' his tone sounded like he wanted to be defensive about it, but it was too resigned to have any impact on her right then, 'otherwise you wouldn't be here.' He lifted his eyes from the floor and stared right into her, dared her to deny it without saying the words out loud and she didn't even try to fight the anger as it went from simmer to boiled over in a heartbeat.

'You are goddamn right I wouldn't be,' vindictive and ready to feel bad about it later, Nancy lifted a finger and pointed it none too gently into his shoulder joint, 'and whose fucking fault is that?'

She's not even really asking but the words burn as they come out of her mouth anyway. 'You come back, break into the house in middle of the night like a criminal after *seven years* ,' she presses into the shoulder again on the last two words.

Fear and anger and bitter tears wrapped themselves into a tight ball in her chest when he lifted his hand to cover hers, didn't pull it down or push it away, just held it gently in place.

She can feel the rise and fall of his chest with the way he's holding her hand, palm pressing flat now and all but her index finger curled in at the knuckle. The mess inside her expanded and contracted with the same steady rhythm.

His eyes hadn't left her face.

'I had to make sure the house was safe.' He said it clearly but it caused a ringing in her ears and she had to shake her head once to clear it.

'Safe,' she spaced out her words, hoped he couldn't feel the pounding of her heartbeat in her wrist, 'from what?'

He squeezed her hand twice against his shoulder.

'Were you followed?' She accused, and he didn't answer her quick enough so Nancy fisted her hand into the fabric and tried to shake him, 'Dammit Jonathan were you followed!?' He still hadn't let go of her wrist but he was thankfully shaking his head back and forth.

'No,' he said it on a sigh, but the relief barely had a chance to take hold before he was speaking again, 'I think it beat me here.' All the feeling left her arms for a beat and then she was pulling away, he dropped her hand immediately and stayed against the wall so she could pace the floor.

When she circled back around on him, he crossed his arms but otherwise didn't move.

'Why am I only hearing about this now?' She waved in his general

direction, 'if I hadn't called you on this would you have told me?' Nerves firing on all cylinders she had to start pacing again. 'You were just going to keep this to yourself?'

'Hopper knows,' Jonathan tossed out, fully leaning against the wall now like she wasn't throwing out sparks with every step, 'Steve too, as of yesterday.'

Nancy breathed in hard through her nose at that, everything about her steaming as she walked slowly back over to stand directly in front of him.

'What?' She gritted out, the word had teeth marks on it.

'Don't you like your normal life?' He asked her, leaning his head toward her with his back still to the wall. 'I do,' he continues before she could start talking, left her with her mouth hanging open, 'I like it for you and I want you to keep it.' He resettled his shoulders and his fingers lifted briefly in his crossed arms, 'I don't regret that.'

'You jackass.' Proving that traumatic events can radically change a person's reactions to dangerous situations, Jonathan laughed. The smile showed his teeth and it tripped Nancy up, she nearly laughed back in reflex.

She was still angry, at this point her anger had levels and sublevels, parts of it were subterranean, but she had bigger problems now. Rolling her eyes heavenward so hard she needed to tip her head back, Nancy picked up the casserole and stuck it in the oven, set the timer to reheat.

‘Sit down asshole,’ she said, pulling out the nearest chair and pointing him into it, ‘let’s talk.’

By unspoken agreement they waited until the casserole had heated up, it didn’t take long, and since it was too early for beer Jonathan grabbed two diet cokes from the door of the fridge and set them down on the corners of the placemats.

‘So what is it?’ Popping the top of the coke as punctuation, Nancy stuffed ravioli casserole into her mouth and waited.

Chewing around his own mouthful, Jonathan shrugged his right shoulder.

‘We thought it was a jaguar at first, our guides found the remains of wild boars around the campsite so we set up tighter shifts for security and kept going.’

He shrugged again, ‘we thought would be the end of it, but we were two groups heading out to the site, and the second group radioed on the last day at the ziggurat that one of the aides had gotten lost overnight’

The casserole started to turn to cement in her stomach, ‘They never turned up did they?’

‘Our guides, a brother and sister around seventeen years old, found him with the small search party that morning.’ They were both just moving the casserole around their plates at this point. ‘Everyone still thought a jaguar had got him.’ Something about the way he said it made her double take.

‘ ‘Everyone?’ ’

‘Luis and Erica, our guides, suggested we leave the next day at first light, rather than hike in the dark,’ Nancy nodded in agreement, a glorified nature photoshoot in a South American jungle claims one life, she’d have packed everyone right up too.

‘It had left the bodies though.’ Jonathan pushed the last of his casserole into the centre of his plate, set his fork down and met her eyes across the table and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

‘Animals don’t do that.’ Nancy took a sip of the coke, tried to cure the sudden dryness in her throat.

‘Luis and Erica knew that too.’ He pushed his hair back the light from the kitchen window hit the skin on his temple at just the right angle she could make out the scar from when Steve had landed that one good punch in the alley. Nancy already knew what happened next but she waited for him to say it outloud.

‘I waited until everyone else was having dinner and then I asked them what we were really dealing with.’ Giving up entirely with trying to eat, he gently moved the placemat toward the centre of the

table, rested his hands flat on the wood in the space left behind. 'Luis hesitated, but Erica was the oldest and she convinced him to tell me.'

Twirling the coke can slowly in her hands, Nancy had no problem putting herself there in the jungle next to Erica, she'd have told him too.

'They called it a *nagual* .' She frowned at that, tried to place it.

'Like a *wendigo*? ' His eyes tracked quickly from her neck to her face,

'Not quite, not humanoid like the wendigo,' he said, shaking his head, ' more like a shapeshifter.'

He'd tried to trap it or kill it, without a doubt. 'It got away?' He shook his head again.

'We killed it, or,' palms turning up on the table, ' we thought we had.' He brought the coke up to take a sip but paused halfway. 'Somethings gotten after Mrs.Lewinsky's chickens.'

If that was all, they might have hashed this whole thing out for nothing, and it must have shown on her face when she answered, 'Could be a coyote. Nothing special about coyotes eating chickens.'

Jonathan slanted her a look over the can as he drank.

‘The roof of the chicken coop is gone.’

Nancy got up and covered what was left of the casserole, stuck it in the fridge and then turned, walked straight to the front door. She paused with her hand on the door.

‘Your car still have that radio?’ she asked. Jonathan had turned around in the chair to track her movement, leaned against the back of it now and nodded.

Nancy grabbed his coat from the rack at the door and tossed it at him, it land in his outstretched hand.

‘Then let’s go, we’ll call Steve on the way.’ And she was out the door without waiting to see if he’d follow.

*

So maybe they hadn’t stopped hunting monsters altogether once they graduated high school. In their defense, it wasn’t like they’d proactively gone out to find them; they just happened to be there, mostly.

The poltergeist in the records room of the university library.

The kelpie in the police academy pool.

The haunting from the New Haven estate sale.

But it happened to Steve first.

Regenstein library in second year, fighting with History of the 20th Century and trying to dig up references to prohibition in the records room when the lights flickered overhead and went out.

Two months of escalating incidents found Steve trapped in Dean's office at 2am, blood dripping into his eyes with nothing but a fireplace poker for protection.

That's how they'd found out iron worked against ghosts. Salt protection had been a result of actual research and no one had been happier about that than Steve.

So when Jonathan read about the New Haven woman who'd died of 'natural causes' at the age of thirty nine, he picked Nancy up outside her dorm on a sunny Saturday morning and they hit up an estate sale, road salt and Jonathan's newest bat in the trunk of the car.

It turned out the police were actually treating it as a homicide investigation, and 'natural causes' had been a poetic interpretation of what happens naturally when a person exsanguinates. Details that weren't released to the public until the following Monday, after they'd spent the night locked in the house with a ghost with

unfinished business.

They'd figured out how to kill a ghost though. Nothing like the necessity of survival to make you try just about anything, including lighting a diary on fire.

The police never solved the house owners murder, but they did uncover her sister's remains in the flue of the chimney. It had been the sisters diary, with a keepsake lock of hair from her first haircut taped into the back that Nancy had set on fire.

She'd meant to use it as kindling to set the whole house on fire, out of ideas while the spectre had itself wrapped around Jonathan's throat, but when the hair caught fire and turned to ash, so had the ghost. And Jonathan had been left leaning heavily against the wall in the hallway with bruises already forming under his jaw and blood on his teeth from a cut lip.

Her own nose had been broken and she'd ruined one of her blouses cleaning up the blood with the sleeve, but they were okay. She'd called Steve from the payphone at a gas station on the way back to Chicago and he met them at the Denny's off the highway before the Chicago exit.

They'd had pancakes and coffee and shared updated information, Jonathan making notes on a napkin so they could update the masterfile they'd started after Steve and the fireplace poker.

Steve had been fond of saying the Upside Down left something on them, like a scent marking, and now they were plugged into all the

stuff that hid behind the door behind the curtain.

By the end of freshman year, Jonathan had made two more bats and they all carried salt in their cars, lighters in their pockets.

Until her third year, it was mostly putting ghosts to rest. But then Steve completed all the credits for his business degree and enrolled right into the academy, and three recruits drowned in the first two weeks.

Jonathan had been sitting on the floor of her dorm room, leaning against her bed with headphones on trying to review for the last exam of his degree, when Steve called her.

The third recruit, Amy Davies age 23, had drowned while practicing swim survival drills in the pool after hours.

Everyone was new, but after Michael Watts was pulled from the pool, Steve paid a lot more attention. The first drowning had been ruled an accident straight out, Julia Masters was not a strong swimmer and had been trying to practice to pass the drills.

But Michael had known how to swim, had had no issues with the drills and his bunkmates confirmed he'd had no reason to swim after hours without a buddy.

And then Amy Davies drowned. Amy who had swam for the state team until a year ago when she aged out of her category and decided

she wanted to be a cop.

Nancy had kicked Jonathan in the foot and put Steve on speaker phone, her roommate Wendy had already written her last exam and packed up for the year, so Steve's voice echoed in the otherwise empty room.

Half an hour of Steve carefully and quietly relaying the details from the public phones in a hallway of the academy and they decided they needed to check it out.

Jonathan tried to talk her out of going with, her exam was the next morning and his wasn't until Friday, but something had killed three people.

'Give me the keys, I'm driving,' had been her exact words in response to his very rational arguments.

She'd ended up being pinned to the bottom of the pool by a kelpie for the longest sixty seconds of her life.

As it turned out, decapitation worked just fine for kelpies. They buried the body separate from the head just to be safe, mixed salt into the dirt because they had no reason to think it wouldn't help.

Jonathan hadn't talked to her the whole drive home, had held her hand and stared straight out the windshield for the two hour drive back into the city.

The deaths were officially ruled accidental and the pool was locked after hours from that point on.

It was quiet for about two months after that. Nancy had found the Masters program brochures on Jonathans desk by this point but hadn't brought it up yet, he'd tell her when he was ready and there were medical schools in New York too, she wasn't worried, not really.

Looking back, she could see now that the wendigo had been the tipping point.

Just before Fourth of July weekend, two campers go missing in the campground near Indianapolis. A week later a family of four reports hearing what they said was a bear outside their tent. They'd slept in the car that night and woken up to their tent shredded.

A mother reports her child missing the next day, multiple searchers claimed to hear the child during the survey of the woods and two of the volunteers go missing in the organized evening search.

Steve met them in the parking lot of the campground as the sun was just starting to set. He had his academy t shirt on with his name stretching in block letters on the back across his shoulders. Grabbing his own bat from the trunk of his car, he'd tossed the extra flashlight over to Jonathan. He'd snagged it from midair with his left hand and passed the box of shells to her with his right.

Steve was the only one of them tactically trained but he still

preferred the bat for close contact, and she was the next best shot of the three of them. Sliding flashlights into their belts, Jonathan stuffed extra shells in his back pocket and tossed a look at her over his shoulder as she checked through the sight on the gun, barrel pointed down toward the pavement. He had a weird look on his face that made a fissure of anxiety shiver up her spine.

At the entrance to the trail she reached out, fingers tugging on Steve shirtsleeve and her right hand hooking onto the pinky of Jonathans' left. 'Hey,' waiting until they looked to her curiously, making sure she had their attention, 'four people, and a kid,' the last part shakes a bit, 'no mercy,' she tugged on both of her tethers to them, 'no risks either. Don't be dumb.'

Steve laughed a little at her but he nodded anyway, tossed, 'look who's talking,' out as he started to walk down the trail.

Jonathan hadn't laughed, just looked at her with his familiar serious expression and said 'no risks,' back at her and hadn't dropped her eyes until she nodded back in agreement.

They made their way down the trail with the bats as bookends and her rifle in the middle. Making a pretty big assumption from the volunteer reports about hearing the little girl's cries for help, they're pretty sure they're going to be dealing with a wendigo.

From everything Nancy found in the library, the size could be anywhere from average human to something much, much, bigger. The families report of a bear makes her hopeful that fear might have made it seem larger in their minds.

Passing the first three clearings, they set up camp to wait at the fourth. Jonathan lights the fire and Steve sets out the can of gasoline, starts building molotovs from the empty beer bottles in the go bag.

It takes a half hour to set up, but there's a kind of rhythm to it, tossing bottles and rags back forth, exchanging gossip. Mike and El were definitely heading to Chicago, Lucas and Dustin were leaning toward Purdue. Will and Max were still up in the air, multiple acceptances on both sides so it was really going to come down to who gave them the better scholarship.

When they had everything laid out, Steve moved one of the logs left by previous campers closer the fire and on an angle.

Falling back into the bookend, Jonathan and Steve took opposite ends and rifle took the middle; a modified but effective full three sixty view of the forest around the site.

And then they waited.

She had started leaning heavily on Jonathan's shoulder when they heard it.

‘ *Momma*, ’ a weak cry carried through the trees, a child's cry.

Nancy straightened up immediately, felt the rush of her nerves endings catching fire in her system that made her leg want to twitch.

‘Wait,’ she breathed out, barely a whisper, ‘make it come to us.’ The fire was dying down to embers in the pit but nobody moved to fix it. Maybe the darkness would help draw it out.

‘ *Momma* ,’ it was closer this time, and felt like it was coming from three angles at once. They stood in unison, Steve’s bat swinging low, back and forth like a pendulum. Jonathan’s up on his shoulder, ready to go.

The trees were moving on their left, Nancy aimed the rifle dead centre and scanned through the sight.

A snapped twig was the only warning and then it was out of the trees closest to Steve and he was swinging up into its torso. Shouted ‘Rifle!’ even as she was pivoting and aiming where she expected the head to be but the rounds hit it centre of the chest instead.

It was huge, it’s body a skeletal mass barely covered with flesh and it’s limbs freakishly long and ending in claws. Its right arm swept toward them and Jonathan caught it above the wrists, halting the claws that dripped, they dripped from the ends, and it dropped the arm momentarily.

Nancy had hit it eight times but it had barely slowed down. It was still skirting the edges of the fire pit, like it knew what lived there, and Nancy risked skipping a reload to reach down and grab one of the bottles they’d lined up earlier.

It only took a second.

She yelled Jonathan's name and set the bottle sailing into the air toward him. He turned and caught it but she'd been still for too long, needing to make sure he caught it, and she watched his mouth form the word before she registered his shout in the air 'Rifle!' and she was turning back to her right as the claws came towards her.

Shooting on instinct, not bothering with the sight, she watched as holes appeared in the misshapen palm of its hand. But she'd skipped reloading to throw the cocktail to Jonathan and the gun clicked, empty, and the claws were still coming.

She dropped as they reached out and they clipped her, hard in the sternum, but she had her hand around a bottle now and a clear shot at its feet. Wrenching her arm up and over, she watched the bottle arc and explode underneath it.

It screamed.

There was no other word for it.

Trying to scramble back upright, she watched Steve throw and heard the glass shatter, felt the heat. She reached out to grab another bottle, unsteady but up on her knees now, let it fly to explode on the things chest.

Jonathan was under her left arm suddenly, shuffling her back out of

the reach of its claws while another bottle exploded, this time the side of its head caught fire.

‘Douse it!’ she managed to yell, her chest burning and cold at the same time, but Jonathan was up and running toward the gasoline. Uncapping the lid, he swung the can so the gasoline trailed out in an arch that caught fire in the air, fed by the wendigo and the existing sparks shooting out from it.

Steve had the other cannister open and poured a circle around the partially collapsed wendigo before tossing the empty can in the go bag, caught the empty one from Jonathan when he threw it over.

Jonathan had her under the arm again, hand gripping her wrist tight and pulling her to her feet and back out to the path.

The ring of fire burned and reached the last few of the bottles Steve had thrown over his shoulder as he ran to catch them.

They ducked behind the biggest tree lining the path just as the last of the bottles exploded.

‘Nancy,’ Steve and Jonathan's voice overlapped, ‘are you alright?!’ Everything hurt and she didn’t want to look down at her chest, didn’t want to think about what might have been on the claws.

‘Is it dead?’ She asked instead, ‘Is it dead?’ Jonathan was pushing at the jacket she’d worn over one of his old t shirts and didn’t answer

but Steve was was still watching the clearing.

‘Yeah,’ he answered, his voice shaking a little with relief, ‘it’s a smoking pile of ash and bones right now.’

She laughed weakly, partially shock, partially sheer dumb relief, and Steve looked down at where Jonathan was using her jacket to stop the bleeding on her chest. The shirt was a goner for sure.

‘Oh Jesus Nancy,’ Steve said, voice barely disguising panic, ‘ we need to get the fuck out of here Jonathan.’ Crouching down to her eye level, she watched his eyes search her face. ‘We need to go Nancy, can you walk?’ He was already slinging the go bag back over his shoulder and grabbing both batts.

‘Fuck you Steve,’ she’d answered, mostly to make him feel better, ‘let’s get the hell out of here. I need a bandaid.’

They’d called Hopper from the car against her wishes, Jonathan radioed it in while keeping Steve’s tail lights right in front of them. But she’d been tossed in the backseat of Jonathan’s car and told to stay in the half upright position, her legs stretched lengthwise across the seats, and nobody was listening to her.

She risked looking at her chest now, even knowing she knew she shouldn’t lift the jacket and relieve the pressure, but she had to know what she was dealing with.

Checking to make sure Jonathan's eyes were on the road, Nancy carefully lifted the closest edge of the jacket. When she didn't see bone, she pressed the jacket firmly back in place and let her head tilt back to rest against the window. If it hadn't made it to the bone her organs were safe and she hadn't completely bled through the jacket so it meant she'd already started clotting, and it was unlikely she'd bleed to death in the back of Jonathan's car.

By the time the car began to slow down she had started to feel light headed. She could hear Hopper squawking out of the radio and Jonathan answering they were five minutes away.

When the car stopped, Hopper was the one opening her door and helping to ease her out. Jonathan came around the back of the car and took her right arm over his shoulder and then he had her behind knees and she was being carried into the back door of the Dr. Sinclair's clinic while she held the door open for them.

She gave orders in her smooth clear voice, had Jonathan deposit her onto the exam table and then she closed the exam room door in their faces.

'If you need a hospital am I going to have to fight you about it?' She asked, calm and a hint of humourous steel running under the question.

Nancy was still holding the jacket to her chest and while she didn't want to have to answer questions at a hospital, she also wanted to live. So she shook her head, the paper under her wrinkling with it.

‘No Doc.’ Coming into her line of sight, Dr.Sinclair nodded like she’d expected nothing less and gently pulled the jacket off her chest, replaced it with sterile gauze pads. Nancy risked a look down and the claws had left two ugly red lines down her chest but still there was no bone.

It burned with pain the whole way down but with Dr.Sinclair running the saline over the wound and cleaning the old blood away, she could see that while she’d definitely need stitches, they weren’t mortal.

‘I’m going to give you a local now, so I can stitch these up for you.’ Nancy barely felt the slide of the needle under her skin, such a small pain in comparison to the pulsing ache that spread out to her whole chest with every heartbeat.

‘You’re going to scar,’ her eyes met Nancy’s as she said it, ‘badly.’ Nancy felt the tug of the needle go in under her breast, but no pain as Dr.Sinclair started to stitch up that groove first, following it up over the inside of her breast to her sternum. ‘I’m not a plastic surgeon,’ Sinclair continued as she worked, smooth and steady, ‘but I’ll keep the stitches as small and close together as I can.’

Nancy had already got there in her mind, what the healed result would be in a best case scenario and she’d decided, laying with the jacket against her chest in the backseat, that she’d be damned if some superficial scarring was going to ruin her day. ‘Thanks Doc.’ She said instead, and managed a small smile when Dr.Sinclair leaned over to check her pupils and do a pulse check in between stitches.

It was quiet in the room, small sounds from unwrapped sterile wipes or gauze or the rustle of the paper beneath her when she moved slightly.

'I'm going to tell you what I told my Lucas,' Dr.Sinclair says, in her familiar even tone, 'I'm not blind, or stupid, so I know this isn't from a coyote or a dog, like the Chief would have me believe.' Nancy's eyes slid over to meet her gaze, 'I also know you're not about to tell me, so I won't waste my breath asking.' She took the scissor to the most recent finished stitch and cut the excess off the end.

'But when the next thing happens, don't you hesitate to call me.' Dr.Sinclair paused, and held Nancy's eyes, waiting for Nancy to nod. 'Okay then, that's settled.' And she didn't speak again until after she'd finished placing the pads over the freshly closed wounds.

Nancy was upright and drinking a juice box to get her sugar up while the Doc wrapped her chest with thin gauze to keep the sterile pads in place.

'You're a steady young woman, Nancy Wheeler.' Her eyes were kind when she said it, and she checked Nancy's blood pressure again, stethoscope gently against her chest for atypical rhythms. 'There are four strong pain killers in here,' she handed over a small prescription bottle, 'take one when you go home to get to sleep, and then again in eight hours. Use the last two no more than once a day after that and come see me straight away if any signs of infection present themselves. Is that clear?'

'All clear Doc,' Nancy reached out a hand to take the bottle.

'When these run out, don't be afraid to use Advil, liberally.' There was a light knock at the door and Dr.Sinclair went to answer it, blocked her from view with her own body. When she closed the door

again and turn around she was holding an faded long sleeve waffle shirt, it had been blue once, but now lived in the trunk of Jonathan's car for emergencies.

This had apparently qualified.

Dr.Sinclair helped her gently into the clean shirt, bagged up her jacket, bra, and what was left of the t shirt. 'I assume you'll want to dispose of these yourself.' She'd said, while tying off the bag.

Nancy crept off the exam table in a slow slide of her butt, toes reaching in her converse for the floor so she could avoid any unwelcome jolts. Dr Sinclair held her elbow in support for the final inches, but when they walked to the door, Nancy was under her own power.

'Thank you Dr.Sinclair.' For a minute, the doctor disappeared and it was a mother standing in front of her, resting a hand briefly, warmly, against the side of Nancy's face, who smiled weakly into it.

'Be careful.' And then she was opening the door to the hallway and all three bodies straightened up from the wall in unison. 'Bed rest, painkillers and keep those wounds dry Miss Wheeler. You're cleared to go here Chief.' Hopper tipped his hat at her and herded Steve out of the hallway toward the back door.

Jonathan, face pale and stiff as a stone, 'You're okay?' he asked quietly. When she nodded, he looked away from her for the first time since the door opened and focused on Dr.Sinclair.

‘She’s okay?’ Nancy had to roll her eyes a little while Sinclair peeled off her gloves and crossed her arms over her chest.

‘You’re going to hurt for a bit,’ she said, addressing Nancy but including Jonathan in the exchanges with her eyes, ‘but I expect no quality of life impact.’

‘Thank you,’ the words were so heavy coming out of Jonathan’s mouth, Nancy almost expected to see them drop to the ground and dent the floor.

Dr. Sinclair waved them out the back door and Nancy watched her silhouette in the side mirror until they turned the corner.

‘Home?’ Jonathan asked, and when she answered back quietly ‘yes,’ he grabbed the radio and signalled to Hopper and Steve he was taking her home. Steve volunteered to bring Hopper up to speed and they agreed to meet the next day at the diner for any follow up. Hopper would deal with any fallout from the campsite; deal with the Staties, who would have been called in by an anonymous tip about stupid kids playing with makeshift molotov cocktails in the campground.

‘You shouldn’t park in front of the house.’ The first pill was kicking in and Nancy had started to float a little, but she still had the irrational teenaged concern of her parents thinking Jonathan spent the night. God, what would her mother say?

But the house was dark when they pulled up in front so Jonathan just put the car in park and helped her out through the passenger side door. Luckily her keys were in her front jeans pocket and not zipped into the liner pocket of her jacket. Jonathan snagged them deftly out, keeping one hand gently in the crook of her elbow, she'd started to list gently to the side.

Unlocking and opening the door quietly, they heard the snoring and the flicker flash of the television from the den, signalling her father had fallen asleep watching the news. Jonathan closed the door almost silently behind them, relocked it, and casually stepping over the bottom step he navigated them both up the stairs.

She had a weird deja vu when he took off her shoes and slipped her legs up to get her under the top quilt. He flipped the light off on her night table but before she could reach out to grab his hand, the mattress dipped next to her and she could feel his hair on her cheek.

'Don't do that again, Nance.' He breathed it into her neck, careful not to move any closer and hurt her accidentally.

Nancy bent her right arm at the elbow, keeping the rest of her body still. The painkiller was making her limbs feel heavy but she found the side of his face, rested her hand gently on it.

'Promise.' She whispered back and let the drug take her under.

Jonathan had waited until her stitches were out and healed, and then he'd told her he was leaving and moved to New York for his Masters. She didn't see him again until he broke into her house in the middle

of the night.

*

Nancy called Steve on the walkie while Jonathan drove down Mirkwood on their way to the Lewinsky farm.

He did not sound surprised; had answered the hail over their old channel almost immediately with a 'Hi there Nancy,' that had laughter all around the edges and though he tried to hide it, Nancy had seen the little tick in Jonathan's jaw as it briefly clenched.

Try keeping her on the sideline, she thought to herself, stoking the embers of her own temper a little, see how that worked out?

'We're on our way to Lewinsky's farm, can you meet us there?' There'd been a longer pause then, and the humour had dialed down when Steve answered this time, crackling over the radio.

'I'll see you when you get here.'

Nancy looked over to Jonathan at that, found him already looking in her direction.

'I thought it already got all the chickens,' Nancy said slowly.

'It had.' The speedometer arrow bent further toward eighty.

The Lewinsky farm had started out with corn, primarily, but after losing both sons to Vietnam, it became more profitable to sell acreage for development. Locals still called it the Lewinsky farm but the agricultural operations had downsized to Mrs.Lewinsky's garden, with the chickens, some goats and one old milk cow on the acres that remained.

Jonathan took the wide left turn onto the driveway that was as long as the street leading up to her parents house in the cul de sac, parked next to the police cruiser already in front of the house.

Getting out of the car, they both stood with the doors open and looked at the house, the empty clothes line, toward the trees behind. Nancy trailed her eyes to the trunk of the car and then back to Jonathan, who answered her unspoken question. 'He'd have mentioned.' And he was right about that, Steve would have signalled if something was sideways.

Nancy scanned the house again, nothing looked out of place, but she had a weird feeling; closed the door to the car and adjusted the knife belt under her shirt.

By mutual agreement, they went the long way around the back of the house. Careful to leave plenty of space between their steps and Mrs.Lewinsky's winter dormant flower beds, Jonathan took the outside lane.

Ducking under the hedge arbor brought them fully into the backyard,

with a clear view of Steve ducking under police tape and waving in their direction.

‘Follow me, show is back this way,’ he called across the yard.

Without missing a beat, they fell into step again and followed Steve under the police tape and out through the hedgerow.

The chicken coop, what remained of the base at least, had been sectioned off again by more police tape.

The entire roof lay an easy twenty feet from the base, fragments of 2x4s from the back of the coop were still attached.

Walking through dirt, feed and molted feathers, they joined Steve at the back of the coop.

‘What the fuck, Steve?’ Jonathan asked, voice managing to be both flat and incredulous, and for a second Nancy was looking through the doors to the academy pool while something massive and otherworldly swam beneath the surface when he’d said those exact same words.

‘Got me man,’ Steve rested his hands on his belt, ‘was kind of hoping you could tell me.’ Jonathan walked around the perimeter of the coop and Steve shot her a look that was all eyebrows and solicitude.

‘In my defense,’ hands out in front of himself, he slowly walked to stand next to her while Jonathan poked around, ‘ I mostly assumed you knew already and were still in denial.’

Nancy opened her mouth to fight that but the coop had no roof on it and they had other things to worry about now. The argument went out of her like a let down sail and Steve judged it safe to finish his approach, stood next to her and elbowed none too gently into her ribs.

‘What do you got Jono?’ he called out, eyebrows waggling at her while he said it, the nicknames were on already. She was in it now.

‘Well it took them all,’ Jonathan came around the coop again, stood at an angle by her shoulder, ‘and you checked the woods for remains?’ He nodded out toward the trees, three hundred yards away.

‘We went about a mile in, found nothing,’ Steve rocked his weight back and forth, ‘ whatever took them, ate them.’ He shrugged, ‘I’m assuming at this point.’ Jonathan looked out toward the trees, he hadn’t zipped his jacket so the bruising was stark at eye level for her.

‘So it’s not the nagual?’ She says it like a question but it’s not, not really.

Steve leans in, ‘The what?’

Nancy just points at Jonathan's neck, but he covers her hand, lowers it between them and explains,

‘The creature from the jungle, it was some kind of shapeshifter,’ he tips his chin out at the empty coop, ‘it killed for sport more than for food, it would have left remains.’

‘So we’re not dealing with whatever messed you up in Brazil?’ Steve ran his hands through his hair and didn’t notice the look Nancy shot him, ‘well I can’t say I’m not disappointed.’

A half laugh escaped Jonathan and Steve waved a hand distractedly in his direction, attention back on the coop, ‘you know what I meant.’

‘Yeah I know.’ Jonathan looked back at the coop. ‘When you told me about this I was sure it had beaten me here.’

Steven exhaled and grabbed his hat from where he’d set it on one of the fence posts, reset it over his hair before clapping Jonathan on the shoulder

‘Not your fault man, I know you meant well,’ he was grinning when he said it and it tugged a small smile out of Jonathan, ‘also you’re now Deputized, Chief’s orders.’ The smile dropped from Jonathan’s face but Steve had already started to walk away. ‘Welcome to the party pal!’

Back at the station, they checked in with Hopper who confirmed,

much to Jonathans mortification, that the deputization was legitimate.

Steve grabbed one of the spare stars from Flo's drawer and tossed it to Jonathan while Hoppers voice came back over the radio.

'I'll deputize you too Nancy, if it comes down to it, but I don't want to take you away from the clinic until we have a better idea what we're dealing with.'

The exclusion burned but she understood. It helped knowing she wouldn't listen if it didn't suit her anyway, and both her and Hopper knew it.

'What did El say?' Nancy leans closer to the microphone, 'it's not the Gate right?'

'She checked, it's still closed.' The three of them let out a collective breath. *'Whatever we're dealing with now isn't local. Harrington, keep me posted, and don't do anything stupid, any of you.'*

Steve pressed the comm button and they all chimed out 'yes sirs' before the channel went back to static.

Leaning back in his chair, Steve kicked one ankle over the other and laced his palms together, tipped his head back into them.

‘At least it’s not the Gate.’ He said casually, staring at the ceiling.

Jonathan scoffed and ran a thumb under his jaw, like he was trying to relieve the pressure built up from clenching it all day.

Nancy could relate. The nerves behind her left eye were throbbing in time with her heartbeat.

‘We’re back at square one though team,’ Steve continue, ‘if it’s not the Gate, and it didn’t come here with you,’ he tilts his chin toward Jonathan, ‘we’re back to trying to figure out what we’re up against here’ Jonathan had looked over at Nancy as Steve spoke. Steve now noticed and followed his queue so then they were both looking at her; some cousin of expectation on Steve’s, and something unreadable as usual on Jonathan’s.

Nancy crossed her arms over her chest and pushed her jaw out, ignored Steve and held Jonathan’s eyes. He broke first.

‘Who else has been hit?’ Jonathan addresses it to Steve, who resettles in his chair, he’d leaned further back, well out of the way, during their staring contest. She’d forgotten briefly about her anger until Jonathan had looked right at her, something uncomfortably familiar about his expression that she couldn’t place, but it had made her chest tighten in response.

Thankfully it also reminded her she was still pissed. Nancy preferred the anger to the echoing sadness it had also called into her throat.

‘The Lewinsky chickens, one goat,’ he read out of his notebook, flipping back and forth between pages as needed, ‘Potter lost three

lambs earlier this week but we'd chalked that up to a coyote at the time.' Eyes meeting both hers and Jonathans over the notebook he raised his eyebrows, 'we're reevaluating.'

The police file from the Potters had pictures of the treeline, their property sat further back from the road and the paddocks were set right against the forest. The horses were stabled for the night, but the goats and sheep usually came and went through the small outbuildings.

Potter never had cause to worry about them before, they stayed in the building when it was cold, and went in and out as they chose. There was no forced entry on the outbuilding, unlike the chicken coop, since there was no door. But three of the small herd had been missing from the morning count regardless.

Steve had catalogued the scene, which explained why there were pictures of the treeline even in the file at all. He'd captured some disrupted foliage adjacent to the outbuilding, but no blood. Bark had been scratched from several trees, no more than waist height, and not uncommon. But no blood there either.

'How far up did you look?' Jonathan asked, looking carefully through the polaroids. Steve flipped a few pages to check the notes in the report.

'We went about a half mile in,' finger holding his place on the paper he looked up at the small dissenting sound Jonathan made in his throat, 'what?'

‘I meant, how far up the trees did you look?’ Steve’s shoulders sagged and he dropped his hand from the page.

‘How big of a thing do you think we’re dealing with Jono?’ Jonathan’s mouth tilted in consideration, his shoulders sloping along the same angle.

‘Maybe a coyote did get these ones,’ his tone was neutral, ‘but better safe than sorry.’ Steve flipped the file closed and slapped a hand on top.

‘Well you heard the Chief,’ Steve picked sharp tin star up from where Jonathan had set it down out of sight behind his coffee mug, tossed it in high arch for him catch, ‘you and me got a date, deputy.’

*

The drive back to Jonathan’s was silent. Nancy regretted not having flipped the radio on when they’d climbed back into the car, if only to distract her. Words kept crowded into her mouth and she had to breath deeply and pretend to clear a tickle in her throat to stop them from crashing out.

‘Working on the bathroom today?’ the words broke through the silence in the car so suddenly she almost jumped in her seat.

‘What?’ He lifted his right hand from the steering wheel and gestured at the thigh of her jeans. Looking down, the light from the

streets passing overhead tossed the orange smudge from the tile into sporadic relief.

‘You decide on new tiles yet?’ he followed up, hand back on the wheel.

‘No,’ she answered, trying not to hate that somewhere along the last seven years he’d learned how to make small talk, ‘I have a couple options,’ the words popped out like some sort of polite conversation reflex.

She watched Jonathan nod out toward the windshield and felt something dissolve; she gave up.

‘How many others?’ she asked, voice more raw than she wanted it to be. He didn’t make her elaborate, looked over at her briefly, streetlights making shadows over his face, and he must have read her mind.

‘Ghosts, mostly,’ he tapped his index fingers against the steering wheel as he spoke, ‘helped exorcise a demon, only the one thank Christ,’ it was said completely without irony. ‘Something was stealing kids in Poland, the locals had a word for it, *hastrman* .’

They were pulling up beside her car now, and when he reached to turn the keys in the ignition, she asked again.

‘How many, Jonathan?’ Country quiet now without the engine to cut

through the air, Jonathan held the keys in his hand, shook them a little.

It was country dark too, no street light to cast shadows into the car and all she could see was his silhouette. When he finally answered, it was better, knowing he couldn't see her face either, the hurt she knew would be reflected there.

'A lot.'

Taking a deep breath, it condensed on the exhale into a thin cloud between them. With the heat off, the temperature had dropped.

She'd regret anything she said, so she got out of the car and walked to her own; unlocked it and climbed in. Tucked the knife out of her belt and back into the glove compartment and then turned the engine over.

Her headlights cut through the mist coming out of the trees and she drove away, didn't let herself look back in the rearview mirror.

Home again in the downstairs bathroom, which was the size of a postage stamp and had no window, but it was the only one she'd actually finished.

It took no more than ten minutes of the shower running after she'd gotten home from Jonathan's to fill the room with steam. Nancy held her head under the spray and fought to fill her mind with normal Sunday evening tasks. She'd reheat the casserole for dinner too, screw it, she'd figure something out for dinner on Wednesday if she

ran out by then.

The Smith toddlers were first thing in the morning, they needed their next round of MMR vaccines in preparation for starting preschool next fall.

If the chickenpox from the weeks before hadn't died out, she'd expect to see a few more cases this week until it burned it's way through the whole class.

Already deciding to treat herself to a double chocolate cruller, Nancy made a mental note to grab a sour cream for Rona. Contraband was better shared.

Wrapping the towel around herself and twisting it into place in the centre of her chest with one hand, she used the other to wipe off the mirror. So used to it now, she looked past the scar that carried up just over the towel, took her hoops out of the small jewellery dish and put them back in.

She grabbed the old shirt from the night before, it was hanging on the hook on the back of the bathroom door where she'd left this that morning. Pulled it over her head roughly and didn't let herself think about it as she did.

It was so faded the color had been leached out by detergent years ago turning it a shade of grayish no colour, and there was a whole in the armpit.

But she remembered the colour it used to be.

Eating the casserole and cleaning up the fresh refuse from the second floor bathroom kept her mind occupied until she climbed into bed. She had the television going, Wheel of Fortune murmuring low, hoping it would lull her into sleep.

It had come back to her in the shower, with her face directly under the hot water, trying to smooth out the throbbing nerves behind her eye, dial back the migraine so she could sleep through the night.

It had come back to her. That expression on Jonathan's face from the station that she hadn't been able to place.

The serious one with sadness wrapped tight around it's edges. He'd worn it when he told her he was leaving.

A contestant purchased a vowel and Vana updated the board, but Nancy wasn't really seeing the letters anymore. She was back at the barbeque they'd driven back home for over labour day weekend. Dustin's mom had done up a whole spread in the backyard with the fire pit already roaring and burning the half dozen marshmallows El had stuck onto her stick.

Everyone was driving up to school on the Monday, into a brave new world, but that Saturday night had been for mac and cheese, spider dogs, and s'mores.

Mike and Will were singing along to The Clash, loudly and off key, while Max and El sat side by side on the picnic bench, swaying back and forth to the song, grinning huge with laughter.

Jonathan had shown up late, so late she'd wondered if something had happened, had already started to worry. She'd started counting down a clock in her mind that when it ran down to zero, she was going to use the radio in Steve's car, just to check.

There'd been no disappearances since the wendigo, no suspicious deaths in the papers. Nothing other worldly that would have explained it already being eleven thirty and still no Jonathan.

That clock in her mind was in single digit minutes when she heard his car pull up. Leaving the party, she took the stone steps two at a time and met him as he was coming around the corner.

His face broke into a smile when he saw her but unlike his usual smiles, this one didn't reach his eyes the whole way. Worry had been a stone dropping into her stomach.

Nancy pushed her head further into her pillow, readjusted her posture and refocused on the television, pulled herself out of Dustins backyard and back into her den.

Enough, she told herself. That's more than enough. She was fine, she repeated in her head again, closing her eyes again, she'd *been* fine.

When it started, she thought the weird buzzing sound was coming from the television, but it wasn't.

Her eye's snapped open and her body tripped into the oldest argument;

fight or flight.

*

Nancy drove away without looking back and Jonathan tipped his head back against the headrest, repeated the motion twice more before he gave in covered his face with his hands.

When he'd decided to come back, laying face up on the floor of the jungle with a jaguar that wasn't really a jaguar bleeding out next to him, it had felt like waking up from a bad dream.

Before he'd lost consciousness, he'd heard Nancy's voice saying his name and that was it.

Luis and Erica had buried the *nagual* and wrapped his chest tightly, crossing one arm over it to protect his cracked ribs from expanding too much and causing any lasting damage.

Nancy tackling him to the floor in the hallway had nearly recracked one.

He hadn't meant to break in. But he'd driven past the welcome to Hawkins sign and it was like the car drove there on it's own.

No car in the driveway, he hadn't even bothered to check the car port, just walked up the porch like a sleepwalker, and his key was in his hand before he'd thought about it.

Paranoid that the *nagual* hadn't stayed buried in it's shallow jungle grave, he'd opened and closed the door so quietly, holding his breath a little. Mindful of the stairs, Jonathan had flat footed his way up to the second floor.

Surprise at seeing only the one furnished room, clearly for guests, carried him to the third floor where it looked the same as it had during the open house. Untouched.

The house looked barely lived in.

It wasn't until he stepped back onto the first floor, saw the cactus on the little table in the kitchen, the coffee mug next to the percolator, that he realized if she was home, she didn't sleep upstairs.

Curiosity got the better of him and he started to walk down the hall, heard the floorboard creak and had the span of a breath to hope that hadn't woken her and then her knee was in his gut, her fists in his face.

He could feel it now if he tried hard enough, the ache under his eye. Pressing the heel of his palms there now he tried to wipe it out, the missed step on the floorboard, the missed step outside the hardware store, the misstep seven years ago.

Keeping the pressure he kept his eyes closed, watched the black turn slightly red before he lifted his hands away and pushed them back against the steering wheel.

He'd done the right thing.

Right?

It hadn't felt easy or kind but it had been right.

Jonathan had reminded himself of that countless times, in countless cities, in tents and hotels and on thin mats barely blocking the cold from the ground. It hadn't made it better, but it had helped make it bearable.

She was Dr. Wheeler now, in her beautiful old house, with her normal life. And she was safe.

She was safe.

Jonathan climbed out of the car into the fog, breaking it apart with every stride toward the house, repeating it to himself like a mantra.

She was safe in her life, and he'd let her crack all of his ribs again as long as it meant she would stay that way.

-

Steve picked him up the following morning, early. Hadn't even called beforehand, just showed up and let himself in with the spare key in the mailbox, sat next Jonathan in the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the table.

'You guys made up yet, or what?' Steve asks, taking a careful sip of coffee around the steam rising out of it. Jonathan just shoots him a look, eyes bleary and barely open. The clock in the kitchen read seven fifteen.

'Go away.' he managed, voice full of rocks. Steve just drank more coffee.

'That's a no then.' He clapped a hand onto Jonathan's shoulder, 'You're an idiot.'

'I'm not talking to you, you're not even here,' Jonathan looked down into his coffee and willed it to be so, 'I'm alone in my kitchen and it is peaceful.'

'Eat your toast Jono,' Steve pushed the plate back toward him, already eating one of the slices, 'good honest police work awaits.'

Jonathan grabbed the piece of toast back out of Steve's hand, shoved it into his own mouth, but the look on his face was resigned. Steve kicked his chair from under the table until Jonathan kicked back. 'There he is.' Setting his empty cup down he pushed away from the table, 'but seriously we have work to do, let's see some hustle.'

The Potters were already out of the house for the day when Steve drove them down the farm access road in the police truck.

'I called them on my way to your place,' Steve said and Jonathan's sharp look cut across the truck cabin, 'they're farmers, they were already up.'

Pulling the truck over to the side of the road, Steve grabbed his hat from the dash and his notebook from the glove compartment. Crossing to the other side of the road, Steve pointed up and to the right. 'Outbuilding it about a kilometer up there, figured we'd start down here, walk our way back up.' Jonathan, eyes already up into the trees, adjusted the camera slung crosswise over his chest.

'Works for me.' He said mildly, aiming the lense up over their heads and adjusting the focus, clearing up the shot.

He took several as they walked, with Steve making notes as they went.

They were in sight of the outbuilding when something caught Jonathan's attention during his scan across the trees.

‘Ho,’ he said quickly, stepping closer to change the angle and bring the trees back into focus. He took several shots, one right after the other, and then followed the line with his arm, pointing up an easy fourteen feet.

Steve followed the angle and came up directly underneath, checking his watch for the time and making notes in his book.

‘Too big to be a bear,’ Jonathan says, ‘even if we did get them around here.’ Steven shakes his head and looks to the surrounding trees, hums a little in agreement.

‘Even a Grizzly would have to stretch a bit for that.’

Jonathan took one last shot, closer than the others and with the sun hitting it straight on. The tree was older, no small sapling, and the four deep grooves had dug in deep enough to pull sap to the surface.

Seeing nothing in the trees nearby, they followed the tree line, outbuilding coming closer into view.

‘This I get,’ Steve gestures to the forest and back to the outbuilding, still a ways out on their right, ‘but the Lewinsky place is dead centre of their field. Treeline is two hundred feet out, two fifty’ he corrects himself, ‘whatever it was just walked out into the open?’ He stood in place while Jonathan took more photos. ‘Out in the open for a couple hundred yards and no one saw shit.’

‘Country dark,’ Jonathan said, face half hidden by the camera, ‘people close their blinds at night, go to sleep.’ The shutter clicks once more and Jonathan lowers the camera, settles it against his chest. ‘It’s not walking around in broad daylight, it’s probably nocturnal, whatever it is.’

Steve made another note and kept walking, Jonathan trailed behind, pace slower and scanning the fence line as well as the trees.

Close enough to the outbuilding now that even Jonathan could have pitched a baseball to it, they stopped in the middle of the road and looked quickly at each other and then into the trees. Something in their hind brains buzzing in warning.

‘Hear that?’ Jonathan asks,

‘Hear *what* ?’ Steve tosses back. Silence stretched out all around them for miles, you couldn’t even hear cars on the highway from here.

‘Exactly.’ Jonathan says, hands free at his sides, like he might need them in a minute even though it was broad daylight. ‘Where are the birds?’

Steve checks his watch and makes a note, flips back to the earlier page.

‘We didn’t catch that earlier,’ he steps closer to the trees now, ‘I’d have written it down.’

‘It wasn’t there to catch earlier,’ Jonathan answers, ‘it just dropped off.’ He scanned the trees, starting at ten feet and crawling up and over. Tried to imagine the shape of whatever it was coming out of the building and back into the trees.

‘Up high, two o’clock,’ Steve has his arm out and up, Jonathan grabs the camera and follows the invisible line up into the trees.

More grooves, deep ones, almost the whole way around the tree Steve was pointing at. Jonathan got the shots and moved closer, tried to find the trail.

‘This way you think?’ Jonathan gestured straight through the thicket, Steve tilted his head to the side before pocketing his notebook and turning back down the road without a word. ‘No?’ he called out after him.

‘Truck,’ Steve called back.

There was no point in both of them walking all the way back so Jonathan crossed over the road and checked the fence for any clues, or blood, before leaning against it. Waited for Steve to drive back.

It was cold out, standard Indiana fall, but hadn’t managed to move past frost to full on snow. Jonathan could almost smell it in the air

though, frozen water ready to fall. Behind him, the fields stretched out and the wind that came through it had a bite.

This time last year he'd been in New Zealand, balmy low sixties and miles of sun. He'd gotten a tan, made friends with the guides, the other photographers on the hike. Hadn't had to kill anything the whole trip. Even when the wind snuck under his jacket, ice cold in stark comparison, he didn't miss it.

The truck drove up, tossing dust from the road into a cloud around the wheels, and Steve jumped out. Coming around the front bumper he made sure Jonathan was paying attention before he straight tossed the bat at him, grip side up.

'We going?' He asked over his shoulder, headed straight into the thicket beneath the marked tree.

Jonathan swung the bat up onto his shoulder and it felt like slipping on an old jacket he'd had his whole life. Well worn in all the right places, broken in.

Twigs and leaves snapped and cracked under their feet, moving steadily deeper into the woods. There were still no birds.

No anything, really, aside from the sounds of their own shuffling steps.

'Where is everything?' Steve asked, bat swinging low and slow on his

left, leaving the sidearm free. 'Have you even seen a squirrel yet?'

'No,' Jonathan paused and did a slow circle, 'do you think it has a territory?' Steve dropped his bat into the ground, leaned on it like a cane.

'I'd buy just about anything at this point, Jono.' Jonathan looked up and around again, turning back counterclockwise and set the bat on the ground. Swinging the camera carefully around so it rested against the middle of his back, he walked toward one of the more mature trees.

'I've got an idea,' Jonathan reaches up for the closest branch, 'maybe,' he hedges. Pulling himself with a small swing of his legs, he changes his grip to get his knee onto the limb. Anchoring his foot where the branch met the tree trunk, he grabbed hold of the next branch, steadily working his way up.

'Anything?' Steve shouts it up to him. Jonathan used the trunk to steady himself, bracing his shoulder there before looking out, trying to see any movement that isn't the wind in the few leaves remaining on their branches.

Half expecting to see a scorched Earth scenario when he'd looked down, the relief dropped on him like weight when the only thing looking up at him from the forest floor was dirt and the burnt orange foliage starting to decay.

He took pictures anyway. There was always the chance of finding something in development. Like it had with Barb.

Shouting down a 'nothing' to Steve, Jonathan started the careful descent. Crouching on the lowest branch, he dropped lightly to the ground, only lowering his right knee on the landing.

'So, nothing?' Steve repeats, still leaning on his bat like Mr.Peanut. Dusting off his pant leg Jonathan straightened up, shaking his head as he did so.

'Nothing but leaves and dirt,' bringing the camera back around to his front he tapped it lightly, 'took a few shots anyway just in case.'

'We know for sure it's not the Gate then,' Steve brought the bat up and down quickly against the ground with a solid thud, 'no dead spots.'

'What do you want to bet the Lewinsky's have chewed up trees?' Jonatha asked, picking up his bat from the ground. Steve spat onto the ground, purely for effect.

'I look like some sort of sucker to you, Byers?'

Huffing out a laugh, Jonathan took the lead out toward the road, retracing their steps through the trees.

Bats braced in the footwell and in the rifle rack behind them, Steve started up the truck, but he didn't turn around, kept straight on the

farm access road.

At Jonathan's look, Steve shrugged. 'I had an idea.'

The idea presented itself as they followed the dirt road along the treeline. Ten minutes of uneven road and the trucks unforgiving shocks and Steve stopped short, looking out into a field.

On the left, a half mile off, the Lewinsky house sat partially blocked by their hedge fence. Steve reached over in front of Jonathan and grabbed the notebook from the dash where it had slide over during the drive, shrugged one shoulder awkwardly, 'It came to me while you were up the tree.'

Walking until they were equidistant between the coop and the treeline, Steve flipped back through his notebook.

'Mrs. L found the coop at five thirty, I showed up around,' flipped to the next page, 'seven thirty.' Nodding toward the trees Steve pocketed the notebook and picked up the bat he'd rested against his leg. 'I did a straight shot survey from the coop to the treeline before, but,' he waved a hand around to encompass their entire morning, 'that was before.'

'How long between the Potters being hit and the chickens?' Jonathan asked, eyes scanning the ground absently, not really expecting to find anything.

‘Four days,’

‘Where the hell was it in the meantime?’

‘I don’t want to know, but I have a feeling we’re going to find out anyway.’

Knowing what to look for now, their heads tilted up as they came up to the thicket right away, no road having cut into it, cleared it down.

It didn’t take long.

‘Top left,’ Steve swung the bat up to point, ‘and top right.’ The bat dipped and locked onto the next tree.

Camera already up, Jonathan adjusted the lense until the scarring took up the whole frame.

‘Looks the same as the ones at the Potters,’ he stepped closer for a different angle, ‘we’ll know better when we develop the prints though.’

Steve looks up at the trees and then back out into the field.

‘I still don’t get how it walked out into that field, all on display.’

‘It hit here first right?’ Steve nodded in response, still looking out into the field. ‘Maybe it was hungry.’

As this, Steve turned around.

‘And it moved West, and there is the Potters, close to the trees with sheep for easy picking.’

Jonathan passed his camera from one hand to the other. ‘It’s not a bad explanation.’

‘At this point, it’s all we’ve got,’ Steve swings the bat through the long grass, ‘and we still might be dealing with the goddamn The Predator.’

‘When’s Hopper due back?’ Jonathan was still studying the gauges in the trees.

‘Tonight,’ Steve said it absentmindedly, he had his notebook out again but wasn’t writing anything in it, tapping the corner of it against the wrist of his opposite hand. ‘I’ll fill him in, but do you think,’ he trails off, looking back up at the trees.

‘Tell the others?’ Jonathan finished, guessing, and Steven gave a quick sound of agreement.

‘Thanksgiving end of the week, everyone will be back.’

‘What,’ Jonathan asked, ‘you don’t think we’ll caught it by then?’ It was either laugh about it or let the unknown swallow them up.

‘It’d make a great story if we did,’

‘But tell them either way,’ Jonathan agreed.

‘And tell Nancy first.’ Jonathan looked sharply over at Steve to find him staring nonchalantly back out across the field. All innocence. At Jonathan's silence, he looks over, expression bland. ‘Coward?’

Jonathan felt the scowl level across his face, even though he’d told himself to remain neutral.

‘Okay.’ Steve said, smiling to himself and swinging his bat up onto his shoulder. ‘I’m starving,’ he tossed it out to the field in front of him, already walking back toward the truck. ‘Did I see a casserole in your fridge?’

-

They sat at the kitchen table, same chairs as that morning, and ate the casserole right out of the dish.

Sporting shorter haircuts, no Farrah Fawcett in sight, with a few

more miles on their faces, but it could have been any number of meals they'd shared in that kitchen during senior year, the years after.

Steve's parents hadn't been in the know, and Nancy's had been decidedly kept in the dark, so the Byers kitchen had been the safest place. They'd studied there, strategized, argued about movies. Ate other casseroles out of his mother's dishes in the middle of the night after burying something in a field, or burning something. Too tired to talk with the shock already out of their system, leaving a pit of hunger and exhaustion.

Jonathan had lost track of how many times he'd handed Steve the sleeping bag and spare pillow so he could crash on the floor in the living room. Nancy always took the couch.

Scrapping against the bottom of the dish on his designated side, Steve looked up, gestured with his fork.

'So you sticking around this time?'

'Still have to travel for work, but yeah,' Jonathan nodded around his next bite of the casserole, it was really good, even better after having sat in the fridge overnight, 'I'm sticking.'

Steve nodded back, resettled against the chair and set down his fork, his side of the dish scraped clean.

'You going to live with your mom the whole time or' he trailed off. Jonathan dropped his fork down into the dish with a clang. Levelled a look across the table and took his glass up to the sink to refill. Drank half of it down immediately, studiously looking out into the living room and avoiding Steve's eyes.

'Fine,' picked up his fork, his glass, carried them over to the sink, elbowing Jonathan out of the way. Turning the tap on, he washed his dishes and set them on the rack to dry. Wiping off his hands on the dishtowel he flicked it once into Jonathan's chest before hanging it back over the counter, 'be that way.'

Lifting his hat off the back of the chair he settled it into place over his hair and started toward the front door, 'I'll update Hopper tonight, drinks Wednesday after work,'

'Call me if something happens in the meantime,' Jonathan offered, still standing at the counter, half glass of water in his hand, no more than a prop at this point.

'Count on it Deputy,' Steve paused with his hand on the open door, 'and return that dish' He called the last order out and then shut the door behind him.

Jonathan exhaled and walked over the table, grabbed the dish and started to run it under hot water at the sink. Scrubbing out the pan he heard the truck start up and drive away, tried not to be annoyed.

Steve was right, when you were lent a dish, you returned it. He wasn't about to keep the dish because he wanted to postpone a

conversation, or icy silence. Unsure at this point what would be worse.

He'd return the dish, he wasn't a coward.

Someone needed to fill Nancy in on what they'd found today anyway, and he knew without hesitation that Steve wouldn't say a word. Sure, it was a passive aggressive approach to maneuver Jonathan into facing a confrontation head on, but it was effective.

Jonathan hated that.

The dish had probably never been dryer in its existence, but the clock on the wall showed it wasn't even half past three. No way she'd be done at the clinic now.

A load of laundry, vacuuming the house, and then putting together a casserole in one of his mom's dishes for when she got back from Chicago that night killed some time.

The casserole was covered in the stove, off now but still retaining heat, and he'd taped a note to the front door so she knew it was there.

Carefully wrapping the borrowed dish in one of special occasion dishtowels, Jonathan locked the front door and willed himself toward the car, into the front seat, keys into the ignition.

The dish set snugly against the passenger side footwell, he turned the radio way up and tried to focus on the lyrics.

Taking the turn off Mirkwood, he quickly turned into town. He wasn't delaying, much, but he figured stacking few extra minutes would really make sure she was home.

And he should run an errand anyway.

-

The flowers weren't fancy, the ground had already started to freeze so the grocers didn't have the widest selection, but he thought they were cheerful.

He'd nearly went with the poinsettias, they always felt like a winter flower to him, hardy. It seemed too soon though, with Thanksgiving still around the corner, to leave a Christmas flower.

Jonathan set the flowers gently onto the passenger seat, nearly buckled them in. He'd wait until December for the poinsettias, maybe even go with a white and red combination. Did people still leave wreaths? He'd check with his mom.

Driving through the suburbs, Jonathan took the curving left that led to the cemetery, parked in the furthest spot from the gate under the

big tree. The sun had already started to set but he was able to find Barbs headstone without stumbling around in the dark.

Kneeling down, Jonathan took the old flowers out of the wire vase and slipped the fresh stems through the bottom. Adjusted them slightly so the tulips fanned out evenly and the violets weren't squished underneath.

'Hey Barb,' he said quietly, still making small adjustments to the flowers in the vase, 'you see her lately?'

The quartz flecks in the headstone caught the sun on it's burning path below the horizon, brought out the rose hue that faded into the grey of the stone in most other light.

'You think I did the right thing, right?' Jonathan knew, objectively, it was stupid to ask. But he chatted with her every time he visited and while he never actually got an answer, he got an answer.

He'd spent seven years reminding himself that he'd left for all the right reasons. Seven years of nightmares where Nancy dies in the forest while he presses her jacket to her chest to stop the bleeding.

Nancy drowning in the police academy pool because he can't get a match lit in time.

Nancy bleeding out in the backseat of his car.

Jonathan has lost track of the number of times she's died in his dreams.

Her stitches had barely been out and she'd been looking through the papers again, trying to sniff out something that might belong to them.

Like she hadn't been ripped open not even six weeks prior, like she wasn't still moving slower than usual.

Like she didn't jerk awake in his arms and clutch at her chest with the pain of healing.

Steve had been hurt on hunts before, they'd both suffered black eyes, broken noses, Steve a cracked rib that one time. His own recent run in with the nagual was one of the bloodiest outcomes for him, but it was a rarity. The last time he'd needed real medical attention had been after the exorcism four years ago when he'd been thrown out of a window

But toward the end all those years ago, it had seemed like every time they went after something Nancy ended up underneath it.

After everything with Will, the Gate, he'd had trouble sleeping, but it had leveled out until the kelpie.

He'd had some bad moments after he left, wondering if she'd keep hunting. Steve would have gone with her, they'd talked about it, but

medical school and distance had appeared to quiet the instinct.

Jonathan had used that correlation to justify his choice at multiple low points during the last seven years, when his resolve had wavered. When the distance and the ache in his chest had almost smothered him in his sleep, he'd imagine her standing at the landing in the house.

The sun had changed angles and when he'd heard her footsteps, slow and steady on the stairs, he'd turned around to see her step into the sunlight. She'd been wearing one of his old t shirts, white and thin, and he could just make out the bandages through it.

Everything he'd ever wanted had collapsed down into that one memory of Nancy standing in that house by the stairs in the sun, and he'd been so sure that if he stayed, he'd lose her forever.

The risk was too much, the price too steep, so he'd left. Thinking he'd done the only right thing.

Barb's name, solid and quiet as always, seemed to absorb his thoughts into the slightly glowing stone. Exhaling long and slow, Jonathan reached out and touched his hand lightly against the epitaph under her name.

'I think I might have fucked up.'

If she'd been there, Jonathan liked to think that Bar would have

laughed at him. 'I'll keep an eye on her for you.' He promised. With a final adjustment to the flowers he rose from his knees, grabbed the old flowers, and made his way back to this car.

It was practically full dark now and he turned his headlights on for the final stretch of road toward the house.

Nancy's car was in the car port when he pulled up the drive, and he could make out the glow of a light on in the kitchen, it shone through the stained glass and the small open slit in the lace curtain of the front door.

Lifting the dish carefully from the footwell, Jonathan thought of Barb laughing at him and used it to get himself out of the car.

He'd made it halfway to the steps when the door swung open and Nancy stood there with one hand on the door and one just out of view. The way her shoulders relaxed when she saw his face made him suspect the hand on the rifle had just relaxed as well.

'Did something happen?' Nancy asked it right off, moving out from the doorway toward him, her feet were bare.

'Everything's fine,' Jonathan moved up the porch stairs so she wouldn't come any further into the cold, holding out the casserole dish to draw her attention, 'I wanted to return your dish,' her eye snapped to it now, 'and update you on what we found today.'

‘Oh,’ it came out almost involuntarily and she turned back to the door, held it open for him to walk through. He held out the dish again and she took it from him with a quick ‘thanks’ before carrying it back to the kitchen.

Jonathan placed his shoes on the matt and hung his jacket on the only available hook on the coat rack before following the sounds of cupboards opening and closing.

Nancy was reaching up to the cupboard over the sink and taking down the kettle, there was a hole in the underarm of her shirt. ‘Go ahead and sit,’ she gestured absently behind her toward the table and chairs, ‘I’m making tea.’

Jonathan moved the magazines from the chair closest to the old wood stove and sat down; smiled briefly at the little cactus in the centre of the table.

Nancy moved around the kitchen in quick, economical movements. In under five minutes there were cup and saucer set onto the table and cookies plated in the centre, and the kettle was whistling on the stove.

‘It’s been quiet around here yeah?’ Jonathan asked, thinking back to her hand on the rifle when she opened the door.

Slightly distracted with pouring out the water, Nancy briefly met his eyes before grabbing a cozy from the drawer.

'I thought I heard something,' she met his eyes against as she set the cozy onto the table, rested the teapot on it, 'before you showed up.'

'What kind of something?' He asked, but she was already shaking her head, pouring tea into the cups.

'The wind?' She shrugged. 'Doesn't matter.' Pushing the milk toward him, she left her own tea black. 'Find anything today?'

'Yeah,' Jonathan poured milk into his own tea and filled her in.

By the time he'd finished, three cups of tea later, Nancy had one foot braced on the chair with her chin resting on her knee. A half eaten cookie sat in the saucer tucked up against the bottom of her cup and there was a considering look on her face. It was close enough to her 'let's trap a monster' face that the scar on his palm tingled a little.

She opened her mouth, but shut it abruptly, cocked her head to the side and looked over at him sharply. Her face like stone.

'Do you hear that?' her voice was low and hoarse.

He hadn't, but the look on her face had him sitting up straighter in the chair, leaning toward the window the same as she was.

Nancy carefully dropped her leg from the chair and then he heard it, a hum but higher pitched. Their eyes locked and then Nancy was out

of the chair and out the front door, rifle in her hands.

Jonathan's reflexes were good but he was still a whole metre behind her. When he made it onto the porch she was already in the driveway, rifle up and braced against her shoulder, scanning the trees.

The humming had stopped.

The fear had reached out to grab his throat so quickly his breath tried to wheeze when he exhaled. Jonathan reached out his hand, but her back was still turned so she didn't see him, kept the rifle up on her shoulder. He had a mental image of hooking one arm around her waist and bodily dragging her back through the front door.

But it was silent outside, maybe the noise had been a car?

Nancy knew what a car sounded like though.

'Nance,' the words made their way past the squeezing fingers of anxiety still wrapped around his throat. She turned, slightly, so he could see the side of her face, but she was still focused on the trees. He curled the fingers of his outstretched hand back into his palm.

'I've heard it before.' Words kept low, almost under her breath.

Curiosity helped to dial back some of the anxiety and Jonathan

stepped closer, came over on her left so their shoulders lined up. Tried not to think about the fact that she was standing in bare feet, no jacket, in below freezing temperature.

He didn't even notice he'd left his own shoes at the door.

'When?'

She turned her attention toward him, her eyes all pupil, black pools and her face was hollowed out into shadows.

'That first week,' Nancy turned her attention back out to the dark but her eyes flicked over once, quickly, 'after you got back.'

Jonathan wanted to reach out again, there were goosebumps on her forearms already, but he kept his arms at his sides, fingers pressing into his palms.

He wanted to know what day, already trying to slot it into the timeline with the Potters, the Lewinsky chickens, but the words got stuck behind his teeth.

The wind had picked up again and the bare branches of the willow moved, sliding together like a sheet on a line, and carried humming with it.

Both of their heads snapped up and over, trying to follow the sound.

Jonathan felt the tremble that cascaded down Nancy's shoulders, she cleared it with two deep breaths, but ice had dropped into his bloodstream. He knew that sound.

'Nance,' the sound had transformed, it was more of a buzzing now, and it seemed to be filtering through the trees from multiple angles. He couldn't tell if it was getting closer or further away. 'Inside.'

Nancy ignored him.

'Something is out there,' she said instead, re cocking the rifle and flicking the safety off. Jonathan moved up a step, staying carefully behind the barrel of the gun but putting himself between the wide open space that was alive with the sound of buzzing and Nancy.

'Inside, Nance,' he looked over his shoulder to the trees when the buzzing trailed off into silence, 'please.'

Tearing her eyes away from the trees, Nancy looked at him straight on for the first time since they'd run outside

'Please,' he asked again, hoping he wouldn't have to actually carry her bodily back into the house, not while the safety was off the gun at least.

But she didn't fight him, didn't say anything at all, just started back up toward the porch again, rifle still up and level at the trees. She only dropped it when they were back inside and Jonathan had closed

and locked the door.

The foyer was dark, only the small light from the hood vent in the kitchen casting shadows. There were flickers from the end of the hallway, he realized she'd had the television on before he'd showed up.

Nancy flicked the safety back on and set the rifle barrel down, leaning it against the wall by the front door. She was still looking out the window through the curtains, lace held delicately between two fingers.

'You going to explain this too?' she asked, not sparing him a glance.

'That was a cicada, or' he corrected himself, 'that's what they sound like.'

'Buzzing screams?'

'Yeah,' he nodded even though she was still looking through the curtain, nothing moved outside, nothing walked out of the trees. 'We're not supposed to get them in Indiana.'

Nancy dropped the curtain back into place and turned, he had her attention now.

'They're what, some kind of bird, no' she rubbed her temple like she

was trying to visualize a textbook page in her mind, ‘an insect. Right?’

Jonathan nodded and tilted his head out toward the trees.

‘Also, it’s barely thirty degrees out, and it’s November’ he added. ‘and they only come around every ten years or so, always in the middle of the summer.’

Now she looked more curious than murderous.

‘So we’ve got cicadas in Indiana now,’ seemingly convinced she wasn’t going to see something walk out of the trees and into her driveway she turned around and leaned back against the door, ‘is this a demon thing?’ Her eyes slid over to him under her lashes.

‘Not that I know of,’ was the best he could offer. Jonathan took another look out the window, just to be sure, ‘we should call Steve, he can update Hopper if he hasn’t already.’

Nancy nodded and casting another look of her own out through the window she turned and walked down to the hallway table.

Jonathan heard the one side of the call, luckily Steve hadn’t gone to Hopper yet, still waiting for him to get back. He’d be able to kill two birds with update now.

The receiver clicked, settled into the cradle, and Nancy walked back into the kitchen. 'Steve will call once he's talked to Hopper, you might as well wait.'

Following her into the kitchen again he almost walked into the tupperware she was holding out to him. 'You can heat this up.'

He stared at her, unable to hide the polite surprise from his face, 'thanks.'

'You're welcome,' the words were a bit stilted, but they weren't cold. Jonathan put the tupperware into the microwave next to the fridge, selected the reheat setting.

While the tupperware rotated, Jonathan carried his cup and saucer to the sink, washed and rinsed them. Nancy was refilling her cup and setting two more cookies into the saucer. She left the tea pot on the coaster and when the microwave dinged she waited until he'd grabbed a fork before walking down the hall. 'We're watching Wheel,' said over her shoulder.

Passing the hallway table, they turned the corner to the right side of the house, passing a partially closed door on their way to the living room. The lamp was already on but Nancy had to use the remote to turn on the television.

Vana appeared, revealing two 'e's for the lucky contestant and Nancy settled into the high backed armchair next to end table, leaving the sofa free.

Jonathan used a coaster, set the tupperware down on the end table next to Nancy's tea cup, and settled back into the cushions.

The leftover lasagna was really good, reminded him of leftovers from Mrs.Wheeler, he wondered if she'd made this one too; given it to Nancy to take home after a family dinner one night. It wouldn't surprise him.

Every once and awhile Nancy would huff out an unimpressed noise under her breath when a contestant picked the wrong letter. Jonathan tried to keep the smile off his face, in case she saw it and stopped.

As the phrase got closer to completion, she started to wiggle her toes, he didn't even think she realized she was doing it. They weren't white with cold anymore, at least.

It was warm in the room, and he could hear the small movements of her legs against the chair, the click of her tongue against the back of her teeth in judgement, little sounds. Small, innocuous things that were so ordinary they could have been from anyone, any person he'd travelled with, hiked with. Any person in a tent in the middle of nowhere. But they weren't.

Some stranger wasn't sitting an armspan away from him, making disapproving noises at the television. For the first time in years he didn't have to close his eyes in a sleeping bag, or a hotel, and remember what her breathing sounded like when she was next to him.

It was that comfortable familiar feeling of eating casserole with Steve, with the added weight of his heart swelling painfully in his chest. But even that was familiar too, the weight and the shape of it. Jonathan just wasn't used to the weight without the added overstretched feeling of distance.

His breathing synced up with hers, almost immediately, but he didn't notice. Letting the lull from the television chatter wash over him, Jonathan didn't even feel himself nod off. One minute the contestant had been spinning the wheel and the next he was back in the woods of his nightmares.

They were always the same. The fire pit burning down to embers in the centre of the clearing and Nancy's shoulder pressing into his back while she dozed. Like always, he got distracted by the weight of her leaning against him, and when the sound came through the leaves it was a shock. Fear and adrenaline sparking in his system like it had back then.

When the wendigo came out of the trees, Steve was still there, swinging up into it.

But when it swung toward Nancy, they were both too far away and when Jonathan started to run it was like there were cinderblocks on his feet. So he watched as the claw ripped into her chest and knocked her flat.

In this version, he reached for her and the blood was already spreading through the jacket, it was bubbling at the corners of her mouth. Dragging her by the arm back, back and away, but she'd

gone limp and he knew what he'd see when scrambled back in front of her, knees of his jeans skidding against the dirt.

Vacant eyes, her face white with death, and cold, so cold against his palms when he brought them up to cradle her face. The scar on his palm burned, his lungs burned; like we was underwater, running out of air.

He bent to rest his forehead against her cheek and her head turned toward him, mouth open and pouring blood.

His whole body jerked as her lips peeled back,

Jonathan

He woke up in the living room with Nancy leaning over him, her hand resting lightly on his forearm where it hung over the arm of the couch.

'Nance?' part of him still trapped in the nightmare, the dream image of her cold white face filtered over behind his eyelids like a negative held up to the light. She tilted her head and looked at him, eyebrows furrowing so that groove formed between them.

'Yeah,' she answered him, however puzzled her expression, 'Steve just called. I filled him in, he said he'll see you Wednesday after he talks to Hopper.'

Jonathan was still staring at her face, something from the dream trying to stay at the front of his mind. With her standing right in front of him the details were trickling away faster than they usually did and he knew he was scowling.

Trying to recover, he cleared his throat, 'sounds good.' Her hand, still on his arm, slipped away now as he sat up straighter but she hadn't sat back down in the chair. Jeopardy was playing now, volume low. 'What time is it?'

Nancy almost smiled, he watched it start at the corner of her mouth before she forced it back into its stern line. 'It's almost midnight.' She gestured to the other end of the couch where blankets were folded neatly under a pillow. 'Crash here,'

'Nance,' he started and she just waved a hand at him so he'd stop talking.

'I've got patients in the morning,' she paused, shifted her weight from one foot to the other like she was debating walking further into the room again, 'you know where everything is so,' she trailed off.

'Night,' he offered, and she nodded back, the side of her mouth tipped up slightly out of its hard line.

Waiting until he heard the door to the den close, he reached to turn out the lamp, but he left the television on. Found the Wheel episode repeating for central time zones and tried to let it trick him into sleep

again.

He made it an hour before giving up.

Climbing carefully off the couch, Jonathan wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and went out to the hall, lowered himself slowly to the floor next to the partially closed door of the den. Leaning his head quietly back against the wall, he set his arms around his knees and watched the front door.

It was mostly an empty gesture, how much could he really do without a weapon in his hands? But it made him feel better, partially settled something in his chest that had been clawing anxiously under his ribs. Beyond the dream, it was a nagging feeling, like he'd forgotten something important.

Even if he slowed it down, he thought as his eyelids started to get heavy, that would count.

That would count.

-

It hadn't come back, whatever it was. And when Nancy woke up the next morning from four hours of patchy , interrupted sleep, there was nothing out of place in her hallway, her foyer, and the blanket and pillow were folded neatly on the couch in the living room.

Jonathan had left a note next to the coffee maker, *fresh at six fifteen*, but his shoes, his coat, were gone.

It was probably for the best.

It was definitely for the best.

He'd had such an awful look on his face when she'd woken him up after Steve called, shock and pain, and it had eaten through the steady current of anger she tried to keep burning in his presence.

She refused to feel badly about it now, that weak moment, because she knew in the buried places of her heart she'd frozen shut, she wouldn't have slept at all if she'd been alone in the house.

Would have laid awake tracing the curving medallion of the den ceiling again like she had too many times before, when the nightmares or the flashbacks wouldn't let her close her eyes without being in the upside down. Or seeing Jonathan dead, body bloody and beaten by whatever they'd been hunting in her dreams. Or no Jonathan at all, just screaming his name into the void and getting nothing back.

Already pouring a second cup from the carafe, Nancy put bread in the toaster and used the clean plate Jonathan had left drying in the rack. The clean glass too. She wanted to soften, could feel herself slipping, but couldn't let herself trip. You can only put an organ through so much trauma before it gives up.

Sometime between checking the clock on her bedside table at two fifteen and four twenty seven she'd played back the memory of standing outside while the buzzing rang in the air around them.

She' worried over it like a sore tooth, turning the memory over and over in her mind. Rewinding parts of it and repeating their sequence. Had the sound come from the left and risen up into the air or had it come from the right. Or had it been the wind making it feel as though it had.

Staring off into the middle distance, Nancy drank coffee without really tasting it, ate the toast dry when it popped out of the toaster.

Jonathan must have stepped around the floorboard when he left this time, the thought intruded while she swallowed the last of the toast. Or he'd timed it when she'd managed to drop into the last twenty minute snag of sleep.

Didn't matter, she told herself, scowl between her eyes that she didn't notice.

Showering quickly and putting her own bedroom to rights, she hesitated at the hallway table, nearly picked up the receiver and dialed.

When the phone rang she jumped, her heart rate spiking, like someone had seen her hand start to reach out. It took her two full rings to pick up, steadying her voice, her breathing.

'Hello,' a study in casual politeness, even though her pulse still fluttered.

'Nance,' Jonathan's voice crackled a bit through the line like it always did at the Byers', he must still be at home. The furrow was back between her eyebrows and the silence had her pulse ratcheting up again.

'Jonathan?' she asked it like a question but she was really trying to ask what happened, something must have happened, something terrible, something

'Steve says someone went missing last night,' it came out rough and Nancy could feel the tips of her fingers start to tingle, 'I'll be there in fifteen.'

Nancy hung up the phone and, double checking the time, dialed Dr.Sinclair's home number. Hopper had already called her so she'd been expecting it, 'Go deal with it,' had been her exact words, 'we'll handle the clinic.'

In the middle of thanking her, Dr.Sinclair had interrupted, 'it's been a while,' she paused , 'so be careful.'

Nancy heard the dialtone click and set the receiver back in the cradle, and feeling calmer than she had all morning, went to change out of her work clothes.

Barely ten minutes had passed and the tires on gravel echoed from the driveway and signalled Jonathan's arrival. Pulling on her heavy jacket, Nancy did a quick check in the kitchen to make sure she hadn't left anything on, and then she grabbed the rifle from behind the coat rack in one hand, go bag in the other.

It had been upstairs under the sheet, but bullets didn't go bad so the boxes of shells were still neatly lining the bottom.

She was out the door and down the steps before Jonathan had fully stepped out of his car.

'Trunk,' was all she said, but he popped it by the time she'd reached it. Flipping the false bottom up, she tucked the rifle, safety on, into the empty gun rack. The go bag went into the back seat and Nancy slid into the passenger side with only a small adjustment to the shoulder strap of her knife harness.

Jonathan had gotten back in the car while she'd packed it up and when she clicked her seatbelt in place they ended up looking over to each other at the same time, like muscle memory. Jonathan reversed out of the driveway, gravel only spitting out from the wheels a little, and they didn't speak at all the whole drive to the station.

Steve met them outside when they pulled into the space next to the only cruiser left in front of the station.

'Follow me,' was all he said before climbing into the car and driving

off.

Jonathan switched to the police channel on the radio as they followed Steve. They heard Flo argue back and forth with Deputy S on the proper spelling of kidnapping but nothing from Hopper.

Nancy watched road, the fields, managed to keep her hands to herself for all of three minutes before reaching out to the radio. Switching it to their old channel she clicked the call out button, 'Steve what are we dealing with here?'

Steve answered right away.

You remember Norm he paused, waiting for her to place the name.

'He spotted El at Benny's, way back when Will first went missing,' Jonathan supplied, not taking his eyes off the road.

Nancy clicked on, stepping on Steve's connection, 'Yeah yeah,' she chanted back, and doing quick math realized he must have been seventy now at least.

Neighbour called this morning, had driven by and seen Norms front door wide open

Nancy went to ask another question but Steve turned left and follow up with *we're almost here, see you soon*

Jonathan took the same turn, following Steve down behind the suburbs with more fields stretching out on either side. The forest was a curve on the horizon, out furthest on their right and then turned inward, they were driving right toward it.

They passed the cemetery on their left and Nancy thought of Barb, thought of the buzzing carried in the wind when she'd visited last.

Had it been there then?

That close to her and she had thought nothing of it. Too focused on what she was going to find when she'd gotten home, too focused on the image of Jonathans face after seven years.

Foolish to blame herself, but it sat heavy regardless.

Norm's house, set back from the road in typical country style, rolled into view. Both squad cars and the Chiefs truck were parked like a barricade on the street, a rough semi circle blocking the front yard and the driveway from local traffic that would start to run through.

Jonathan pulled the car over behind the cruiser Steve was climbing out of. Nancy glanced over at him as he put the car in park and they decided with a look to leave the tools in the trunk. They might need them later but Deputy Sawchuk. might be there, there might be Staties. Smarter to wait it out. With a small frown of decision centered around his jaw, Jonathan reached an arm into the footwell of the backseat and pulled out his camera.

In broad daylight they had less to worry about, so far no one or no thing had gone missing during the daylight hours.

Closing the doors in unison, they walked around the car, skirting the hood on either side and followed Steve over to the front of the house where he was talking to Deputy Sawchuk.

‘Go tell the Chief our extra hands are here will you,’ he said, and Deputy Sawchuk nodded over to her and Jonathan before disappearing to the back of the house.

Steve took his hat off and ran his free hand through his hair. ‘Neighbour said they were letting the dog out for the morning constitutional,’ not even bothering with a greeting he pointed up the street where the closest house could be seen behind its hedgerows. ‘Walked this way like they usually do and he saw the door swinging wide open.’

Angling back toward the house, Nancy turned to look at the front door and sure enough, the simple wood door was open, wind holding it back into hallway where the ceiling light was flipped on.

‘Neighbour, Walt Greely you remember him,’ he added for Jonathan’s benefit, ‘thought Norm might have had a heart attack or something, went up into the house and when he found it empty, called us from the kitchen phone inside.’

Turning back to Steve, Nancy frowned at the funny look on his face,

but his attention swept over to Jonathan and then over to the yard quickly when Hoppers voice proceeded him around the corner.

‘No sign of him out back,’ Hopper took off his own hat and then resettled it, ‘captured a couple footprints but that could have been from anytime.’ He was close enough to them now, completing the fourth point of a square, but he lowered his voice anyway. ‘Damage to some trees back there, a good ways up,’ he looked over to Jonathan, ‘we’re going to need to compare photos.’

‘I’ll need a dark room,’ his hands were already adjusting the cross body strap and removing the lense cap. Hopper nodded with the look of man who was trying to ignore how badly he wanted a cigarette.

‘I’ll call the high school, get you access.’ Jonathan nodded and pointed with the camera toward the backyard in silent question. ‘Yeah,’ he waved a hand, ‘get lots.’ Zipping up his jacket, Hopper turned to Steve, ‘I’m going to talk to Walt, don’t go anywhere.’ The last order was directed at them both and then Hopper was walking through the cruisers and across the street, didn’t even both to check for oncoming traffic.

Brushing hair out of her face that the wind had kicked up, Nancy caught Steve looking at her again with that same expression.

‘What,’ she said, voice flat. Steve put his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Nothing.’

‘Not nothing,’ she jammed a finger into the soft where his shoulder met his chest and he flinched back.

‘Ow,’ he brought a hand out of his pocket to press against his shoulder, battling her hand away when she tried to poke him again, ‘quit it. Nothing alright?’ he held both hands out now in surrender.

‘That’s what I thought.’ satisfied she’d made her point, she kept trying to smooth her hair behind her ears, started to follow the route Jonathan had taken minutes before, ‘I want to see these trees,’ she said over her shoulder and waited for Steve to catch up.

Nancy came around the corner just in time for the sun to burn through the morning clouds and hit her right in the eyes. She’d see Jonathan already, before being partially blinded, standing by the workshed with his camera angled up, so she kept her stride in that direction.

The afterimage of UV light kept flashing against the backs of her eyelids when she blinked but she managed to pinpoint the trauma in the trees. Deep gouges in a couple of younger saplings, bent branches leading back into the forest.

‘Same as the others?’ she was asking either of them, not having any reference for what they found at the Lewinsky’s, the Potters.

Jonathan nodded his head behind the camera. The trees were dense along the edges, and the damage looked to her like it was done more

from something making room than for pure destruction.

‘How big do we think it is?’ Nancy leaned back slightly to meet Steve’s eyes behind Jonathan’s back, still preoccupied taking photos, ‘Roughly?’ She hedged.

‘Twelve feet, give or take Jono?’ Steve wagered. Jonathan gave an assenting sound in his throat. ‘The trees are real tight together here, same as the Lewinsky place,’

‘The Potters too’ Jonathan chimed in now. Lowering the camera he moved toward the trees, trying to follow the markings further in.

‘It didn’t break any of the branches though, all the trees are intact,’ Nancy pointed up to the bent limbs, but there were no fallen trees anywhere, ‘so it’s tall, but not overly wide.’

Steve rubbed a hand against his jaw, considering, and then took out his notepad.

‘No broken trees at the others either,’ he confirmed from his notes, ‘I can’t say this makes me feel any better about this,’ he offered, notebook going back in his pocket, ‘but it doesn’t make me feel worse.’

‘Hopper is talking to Walt,’ Nancy stepped closer to Jonathan until she was standing shoulder to shoulder, she wanted to see his perspective; he’d started taking pictures again. ‘Trying to narrow

down the timeline, I think.'

'The window is huge right now, anywhere from eight thirty last night when he left the diner to around seven this morning.' Steve shook his head a little at no one in particular. 'It gets dark at four in the afternoon right now, Norm could be missing since nine last night and we'd be none the wiser.'

Nancy knew Norm, a little. Remembered him from when Will went missing, but more for how him and Dr.Sinclair would argue baseball whenever he came in for his annual, or any of his aches and pains. They never agreed, Dr. Sinclair was pure Boston pride and Norm loved the Orioles for some reason unknown to her, but they ended every appointment laughing about something. He was polite and kind and always tipped his hat to Rona.

She was terribly afraid something awful had happened to him and they wouldn't find him in time. The fear had already settled, cold and sharp, into her stomach. She could see it in Jonathans face too, and in the set of Steve's shoulders, the way Hopper had wanted that cigarette, desperately.

There would be no happy ending here.

Hopper came back around the corner, Deputy Sawchuk beside him. 'Walt says he went to bed last night around midnight and Norm's tv was on, the front door closed,' he waved his hand back and forth briefly in a sort of charade, ' Norm leaves the curtains open in the house if he's home.'

‘We’re working on a seven hour window now instead of twelve, so Kev,’ he pointed his hand out flat to Deputy Sawchuk, ‘go radio Flo, give her the update and tell her to start organizing the search party, bring Gary in from the Staties. If he’s still on foot he could be in the forest pretty deep so we need to get started.’ Deputy Sawchuk nodded and jogged off back the cruisers.

What little mask there was fell from Hoppers face as Deputy Sawchuk’s footsteps fell out of earshot.

‘We’re not going to find him,’ his voice was resigned, ‘we’ll get people out looking but it’s not going to end well.’

‘We need to set a trap,’ Nancy said and the look Jonathan shot her only made her cross her arms, stiffen her spine. ‘We need to know what we’re dealing with.’

Hopper met her eyes and nodded, attention shifting to include the others, ‘We’re all on night shift now, grab whatever you need and be back here by four,’ he started to walk away and then turned back like an afterthought, ‘get some sleep.’

With Sawchuk gone, and the street still blocked off from local traffic, they popped the trunk of Jonathan’s car and took stock.

Nancy’s go bag had mostly short range weapons, knives, two pistol boxes with ammo, more knives; better for hand to hand. The rifle was her only long range gun. Steve was reloading the loose ammo from the bag into the spare magazines, materials set out on the trunk on his cruiser. He was humming something under his breath while

he worked, she couldn't quite make out what it was, but she caught bits and pieces while she dug through the trunk, Jonathan working steadily beside her.

He had a shotgun under the first false bottom section she hadn't seen before, he'd set it aside, nose in the dirt, and leaning against the rear wheel well. His hands filtered carefully through his own knives, a small gas can, multiple lighters, spare matches. A bag of salt and empty shotgun shells.

After the haunting at the estate house, they needed more effective weapons when dealing with poltergeists. Never again would she be left with nothing but the hope a burning book would make a difference. Steve had been doing regular work in the gun range at that point and he'd showed her the shredded target after short range target work with the shotgun. The whole centre mass had been blown away, with the radius edged in misted punctures.

She knew people used rock salt in shotgun shells as a deterrent, had heard her mom talk about how her grandmother had used it on the farm to warn off trespassers. Salt wouldn't kill somebody, would just sting like the dickens, her mom said, but it had given Nancy an idea.

Buying the re-sheller had been the easiest part, and packing the salt into the empty shotgun shells just took time. But now they could buy themselves time.

'What do you think?' she asked, lifting the salt out of the way so she could get at the whetstone in the box underneath. Jonathan shrugged, she felt it against her arm when she moved the salt over to his side.

‘We’re pretty sure it’s not a spirit,’ he gestured with his hand like a fan back and forth, ‘they don’t move around this much.’

And while they could have done the damage to the trees, the quick look between them settled that the roof of the chicken coop would have been a new trick for a ghost.

‘Not that it couldn’t, I guess,’ Jonathan handed one of his own knives over to her, and she lined it up next to the others in her queue, ‘we shouldn’t rule anything out at this point.’

Turning around to half sit on the bumper, Nancy picked up the first knife and set to work it against the stone, jaw pushed out in consideration.

‘You think it’s something else too,’ she said, tilting her head toward him. Steve was still humming, it sounded like the chorus of *Roxanne*.

‘I’ve never seen a spirit lift the roof off something before,’ echoing her earlier thoughts outloud he started to count out shells.

Steve came around on her left, carrying the bag of now refilled magazines, ‘Trivia?’ he asked, setting the bag neatly into the trunk.

‘Ghost or no ghost,’ Nancy says, sliding the sharpened knife into its case, picking up the next. Steve rocked back on his heels.

‘The trees, okay,’ he allowed, ‘but the roof?’ He clicked his tongue against his teeth. ‘That’s a stretch, even for that first one, and it practically tore the chandelier from the ceiling of the dean’s office.’

‘And what’s it tied too?’ Jonathan asked, still counting shells, ‘the Lewinsky’s, the Potters, Norm,’ each name listed out as a shell took place in the box, ‘what, they all have the same cursed object?’

‘Nah,’ Steve was shaking his head, ‘no way.’ He shook his head a few more times but didn’t say anything else.

Nancy picked up Jonathan’s knife and worked it against the whetstone, slow methodical passes on both edges. It was an old knife, she recognized the handle. She wondered if he’d taken it with him when he left, had it travelled the jungle with him, hiked mountains? Had it killed any monsters for him?

‘We need space to put these together,’ Jonathan had finished boxing up the empty shells, set them next to the salt in the trunk.

‘I’ll do those at the station, switch out with Kev on the desk,’ held his hand out and open. Jonathan hit him with the salt first, a low easy toss, but swapped magazines out for the boxes and handed over the bag.

‘We’ll stop in town, get a few things,’ Nancy had started to compile a list. The shells would be back up, but she was pretty sure none of them were expecting to deal with ghost that night. They’d need

something more than salt.

‘See you at four,’ Steve called out, already climbing into the cruiser and reaching for the radio.

Nancy sheathed the knife, sliding off the bumper to stand and repack the whetstone. When the false bottom was back in place Jonathan dropped the trunk lid, heard it latch and turned to her,

‘Let’s go shopping.’

-

Deja vu hit him directly in the chest, like a fugue state, when he followed Nancy into the local hunt shop. He was unexpectedly seventeen again and the sharp line of her jaw was telling him what to do, where to go; making him lose track of conversations. He remembered trying to keep from looking directly at her, like she was a solar eclipse.

Nancy went straight to the bear traps.

He went for the chains, the large gas can, even more ammo. The long iron nails would need to come the hardware store, Jonathan needed a spare bat.

Nancy was standing, hands on her hips, staring at the wall of rifles.

Her jacket was different, but still brown. Jeans now and Doc Martens, both well broken in so they were white along the stress points, but the slightness of her shoulders, the angle of her elbow from her hand on her hip were the same. It was like looking back in time with a lense just out of focus.

The sharp diagonal of her hair, cropped so short along her neck, yanked him back to the present.

Setting the last box of ammo at the cash, Jonathan walked over to stand next to her, careful to make noise as he approached and stay in her peripheral as he did it. She knew he was there, could tell by the shift of her weight from one foot to the other, but she didn't look over her shoulder at him, didn't turn her head at all. Kept staring between two of the larger rifles on the wall.

He waited her out, she had the groove between her eyebrows and her mouth was that hard line it took when she was thinking on something. No point in saying anything, she'd work out her own complicated process and tell him what he needed to know when she'd resolved whatever question she was wrestling with.

She knew he was there, but her preoccupation with the wall, or with whatever she was turning over in her brain, gave him some time.

He wasn't afraid to look at her straight on anymore, but it was still easier, more familiar, to take her in in glances. The sharp point of her nose in profile was disrupted slightly whenever she wrinkled it, like she'd had a solution and then discarded it as no good.

There was a pin holding back the short hair around her ears, Jonathan had watched her put it in place when they gotten back in the car. She'd made the complicated twisting motion appear smooth and practiced and he'd lost a moment watching her hands secure the pin into place.

The muscle in her jaw twitched once, and he could just make out the sound of her exhaling through her nose. He was ready for her to start speaking a whole two seconds before she did.

'You ever encounter a spirit that sounded like a cicada?' she asked, sliding her eyes over to him under her eyelashes, she already knew the answer.

'No.' He admitted it easily. It had been gnawing on him too, something sitting at the base of his skull. She nodded and turned her attention back to the wall.

'Me neither.'

Something shifted over her face while they stood there and it had the gnawing at the base of his skull flare up, creeping fingers around and over until it reached his temples. 'Let's go get your bat,' she said before pivoting and walking toward the cash, leaving him staring after her while he tried to ignore the dread that was spreading down from his neck to settle in his chest.

They had to drive to the Home Depot in Fort Wayne for the nails. The local hardware didn't carry iron. It wouldn't matter if it wasn't a spirit, the nails do damage to corporeal objects whether they were

iron or not, but it was just one less thing to worry about if they had them.

By the time they were driving back down the country road it was close to three thirty and the sun had already started on it's path to setting. They' d stopped for food on the interstate, Steve's burger order with fries slowly cooling in a bag in the back seat.

Every once and awhile Nancy would shift her shoulder blades against the seat. After the third time Jonathan realized it was because she had her knife strapped under her arm, held there around her shoulders by a belt, and it was digging into her ribs if she sat the wrong way in the seat.

It had always fit her better standing, not really designed for sitting in a car. Jonathan had had to adjust it, out of the box it had been too big for her, cutting four inches and restitching had made a big difference but he hadn't thought far enough ahead with the measurements to account for sitting.

It had been a gift for her twentieth birthday.

He hadn't been able to give it to her at the dinner with her parents, Mike and Eleven singing the loudest happy birthday from one side of the table, so he'd waited. Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler had left the four of them in the living room watching Ghostbusters for the millionth time. Nancy and Eleven sat huddled next to each other on the sofa. Mike was sitting on the floor with his head leaning against her knee. Nancy had made it halfway through the movie before untucking her legs from underneath her like she always did and hooking her left leg over Jonathan's shoulder. Her foot dug into his side when she jerked or laughed.

The credits had started to roll and Mike got up, hand held out for Eleven to link her fingers through and Jonathan had tossed his keys up for Mike to catch from mid air. He'd drive back home to Hoppers, make sure she walked through the door safely and then drive back.

Listening for the sound of the car driving away, Jonathan had gotten up from the floor quietly and stood at the bottom of the stairs, head tilted for the sound of Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler moving around upstairs.

Nancy had uncurled her other leg, setting both feet on the carpet like she was about to get up and follow him, a questioning look on her face. He held out his hand in a 'stay there' gesture, holding his other hand up to his lips. He waited a full minute to make sure there was no movement from the second floor before grabbing the present from behind the recliner where he'd hit it earlier.

'Surprise.' He said quietly, holding the thin parcel out to her before resettling into his space on the floor.

The smile on her face had seemed supernaturally white with the bold font of the credits still scrolling slowly on the television. She'd ripped into the bright paper right down the centre and pulled back the tissue underneath.

Initially Jonathan had tried to find her something in a plain black, but the sizes were nowhere near what she'd need. So he'd gotten creative. The rodeo had women's divisions and their equipment worked just fine in a pinch.

He'd waited anxiously when she lifted the belting out of the paper, the small blue flowers were only embroidered at the back between the shoulder blades so he hoped she wouldn't mind. The memory was so clear in his mind Jonathan could see the flash of the television against her ring when she held the belt against her chest. Bending at the waist, trapping the one arm still holding the belt between her chest and her knees, she'd moved her grinning face right in front of his. Right when he felt his eyes start to cross she'd swayed into him, pressed her thanks into his mouth. Everything inside him had just lifted.

Jonathan took the last turn back onto the country road just as the street lights came on, dusk approaching even quicker than the day before. Steve's cruiser was already parked in the drive when they pulled up so Jonathan parked on the street directly in front of the house. No sign of Hopper yet but depending on how the search was going they might have to adjust their already loose plan on the fly.

Turning off the car, Nancy unbuckled and turning toward him briefly, put most of her upper body through the space between their seats. Reaching for Steve's dinner with one hand, she braced her other on the space just above his shoulder, forearm nudging against him as she pushed herself back.

'What do you think, ' she started to ask, half gesturing with the bag toward the house, ' plan first or set up here?'

'Your call, ' Jonathan offers, nodding his head out to the empty street, ' no sign of Hopper yet.'

'Stuck with the search probably,' she's twisting her ring around her finger with her thumb, 'everyone thinks Norm is just missing, old age

finally giving him an episode and he's wandered off, at worse' Nancy points a finger toward the trees, ' an animal got him.' She slouched back into the seat and barely managed to hide the wince from leaning on her knife wrong.

'Let's see what Steve has to say, maybe he has an update.' They climbed out of car and with the coordinated slamming of the doors, Steve came around the corner from the back of the house, eyes lighting up when Nany swung the bag back and forth, held out in front of her.

Meeting halfway, Steve took the bag and immediately started in on the burger, no pause, and started to talk through the bites in his mouth, 'Hopper said to start at this side, walk our way inward and meet at the middle distance between here and the Lewinskys,'

'Where's the search party?' Nancy was scowling at the tree line already.

'Opposite direction,' Steve said, mouth full of fries now too, 'no crossover if we can help it.'

That look, the same one from the shop, shifted over Nancy's face again. Steve caught it and his eyes flicked over to Jonathan, eyebrows raised and the last of the fries going into his mouth.

'Nance?' Jonathan asked, tone leading a bit on the syllable.

‘Doesn’t this feel familiar to you?’ She asked the both of them. Steve crumpled up the bag and stuffed it in his pocket, mouth frowning a bit in consideration.

‘I mean, sure,’ he shrugged, ‘feels like old times.’ Nancy shifted her eyes to Jonathan, waiting.

‘Does it feel familiar to you?’ he asked instead of answering. There was a general sense of dread that had come over him as sky darkened and he’d started to second guess whether the nagual *had* actually managed to follow him here. Like de ja vu, but sharper. He didn’t know how to articulate that to her though.

‘We’re out of practice,’ side eyeing Jonathan briefly here, ‘mostly, so what did we pack?’

Steve started walking to the trunk of the cruiser so they followed. ‘We’re gonna have to carry a bunch of this stuff with us for at least a kilometre to reach the midpoint,’ popping the trunk, the bear trap stood out first.

Nancy had her hands on her hips and was nodding into the trunk with approval, ‘Let’s divvy this up.’

Separating out the gas can Steve recommended creating the molotovs first and carrying them finished to the meeting point. No one argued so they set up an assembly line on the hood of the cruiser, stuffing old short neck beer bottles and setting them back in the cases.

Jonathan packed the ammo bag for the rifle, grabbed the newly sharpened knives from that morning and secured one to his own belt.

Passing another to Steve, he held the last one out to Nancy who slide it into the empty pocket of her holster under her right arm.

Nancy grabbed the wheelbarrow from Norms workshed and they carefully set the cocktails into the deepest part, balanced the bear traps carefully next to it.

Steve had his police issue and extra magazines on his belt, but he slipped the bat into the small backpack with the extra gas, the lighters, slung the lot over her shoulders and carried Jonathan's bat in his free hand; helped Jonathan balance the wheelbarrow with the other.

By the time they walked through the treeline into the dense underbrush of the forest it was full dark. Minimal cloud cover meant that the breaks in the mostly bare canopy branches showed glimpses of stars and the moon cast shadows for their flashlights to cut through.

It wasn't exactly like old times, balancing the wheelbarrow meant that they couldn't house the rifle between them, so Nancy walked alongside. Flashlight in one hand and tucked under her right arm, the rifle with its barrel at the ground while she swept the light back and forth, checking the forest floor for abnormal debris.

Steve was back to humming again, kind of low and words slipping out under his breath but Jonathan was pretty sure he could make out the lyrics to 'The Boys were Back in Town'. His nerves were still sparking at the ends like live wires but he felt himself smile a little. Automatically looking over to Nancy, he found her smiling too, just

a little, and her head turned back over her shoulder to share it with him. It only lasted a second, before her mouth dropped back into the line it usually formed around him now.

‘So do we tell the others on Friday,’ Steve interrupted his own humming with the question, ‘or no?’

Nancy looked over at Jonathan again but this time she was scowling for unrelated reasons.

‘One way or the other, yeah.’ Jonathan tried to shrug into it but it was hard with both hands on the wheelbarrow handle.

‘If we catch it, great,’ Nancy picked up the thread, ‘if we don’t catch it, they’re going to need to know what’s going on.’

‘They’ll want to help,’ Steve pointed out, ‘you know they will.’
Tilting his head up he directed his words to Jonathan, ‘you think your mom is going to just stay at home, Jono?’

Jonathan had thought about that, and he knew his chances of convincing his mother to just sit this one out were slim to never happening ever. He knew that. But he hadn’t wanted Nancy involved either and that had blown up spectacularly in his face.

‘She’s got her own gun,’ Jonathan said in response and Steve howled out a laugh. ‘We can’t keep them out of it,’ he continued, Nancy had slowed her stride down slightly next to them but he wasn’t sure why,

the rifle was still down so he continued, ‘ we just have to finish it before everyone is back and wants in on the action.’

Checking his watch and the compass he’d pulled from his pocket, Steve started to pull them more to the left. ‘We’re almost there.’

Sure enough, no more than fifteen minutes later they saw light from a fire through the trees. Hopper had a cigarette in his mouth, unlit, but by the look on his face as Deputy Sawchuk was speaking to him, the fate there was still up for debate.

The original bat was leaning slightly against the leg of his trousers, hand resting lightly against the grip while he nodded along with Sawchuk.

Steve guided the front of the wheelbarrow through the leaves and past Hopper, nodding a quick acknowledgement as they got the wheels through the dirt until they could set it down next to the fire.

Nancy stayed with Hopper, chatting with Deputy Sawchuk, while Steve bent to help him unload. Setting both bats aside, Steve lifted the bear traps out first and carefully set them next to the one Hopper had brought. Jonathan unpacked the ammo and whistled once, Nancy looked around Hoppers shoulder and caught the boxes he sent her way, low arch in the air like a juggler being fed bowling pins.

‘Dustin says Max is thinking of moving back,’ Steve chatted easily as they set up the cocktails, far enough away from the fire for safety but still in easy reach. Jonathan looked at him over the wheelbarrow as they crouched down on either side

‘Really?’ Max had been the one who he pegged for sure to stay in the city. Steve lifted the shotgun out of the bag, more ammo, started loading the salt shells into it while he nodded.

‘She applied to teach science at the middle school,’ shells falling into place with a steady rhythm, ‘the high school too.’ Jonathan raised his eyebrows.

‘So she’s serious about it then?’

‘Seems that way.’ Steve looks over at him briefly, hands smoothly reorganizing the loose shells left in the box, and reading the expression on his face nodded as he focused back on the shells ‘I know, I was surprised too.’

‘Huh,’ was all Jonathan said.

People made decisions for all kinds of reasons, his eyes flickered over to Nancy as she talked to Hopper. Not quick enough to look away, he watched her face drop from where she’d been looking up to meet Hoppers eyes and met his instead. If she was surprised to see him staring at her, she didn’t show it, no anger in her expression either. She was all business. He watched her tilt her chin up in a quick gesture, whistling at the same time and now Steve was looking over too. When she tilted her chin again Jonathan stood up and walked over, Steve right behind him.

Hopper didn’t even wait until they’d made it all the way over before

he started talking. 'Deputy and I are gonna do a perimeter, keep your walkies on,' this was directed to Steve, 'and if anything happens you radio for backup,' he hand his hand out now, all four fingers pointing at the three of them in turn, 'are we clear.'

'Clear,' they echoed in unison.

'He told Sawchuk he thinks we're dealing with a cougar,' Nancy said, her eyes watching the space where Hopper's jacket had disappeared into the trees.

'That's a bit of a stretch,' Steve said, 'but still more believable that whatever we're actually going to be dealing with tonight.' Clapping his hands together he looked to Nancy, to Jonathan, and then back. 'So who brought snacks?'

Nothing happened for hours.

Sitting around the fire for warmth, Jonathan could feel the cold creep closer and closer up his back as night settled into the ground. Any heat from the sun rapidly disappearing into the air, he watched their breath condense briefly and then disappear.

They counted bullets, divided the cocktails between them and waited. Hopper and Sawchuk came back from their perimeter check once already, with nothing to report except for the empty beer cans they'd found throughout the reconnaissance. After they left for the second time, Nancy had reorganized them so they were seated in a modified triangle, facing outward.

That had been over an hour ago and Steve's last time check had them edging toward midnight.

Steve had one leg crossed over the other on an angle and was using the bat to prop one arm, resting his face heavily in his hand. His eyes were closed but Jonathan could feel Nancy start to list sideways, but so far she managed to catch herself before leaning completely into the space where his shoulder blade sloped into his collarbone.

It all felt too close to what they'd been before and simultaneously not close enough. Jonathan hooked his arms around one raised knee and rested his chin in the dip created by his elbow. He could feel himself slipping into sleep but Nancy was reciting poetry under her breath to stay awake and Steve was humming low in his throat again. He'd use that to stay awake.

He didn't think he'd fallen asleep but the forest morphed and shifted behind his eyelids, a mix of the forest he saw in his dreams but he could still hear Nancy whispering next to him. Or he thought he could. Whispers melted into the of the wood crackling in the fire and then the wind carried something higher pitched toward them in the clearing. Something was whistling - or singing - or crying.

momma

And his eyes were snapping open and the hairs on the back of his neck had stood straight up. Jonathan didn't know how much time had passed, but the fire was lower and the only sound was the wind moving through the trees, Nancy had stopped reciting and Steve wasn't humming anymore.

‘Three o’clock,’ Nancy breathed out and Jonathan looked out into the darkness directly in front of him.

Steve’s shoulder twitched against his own and they got to their feet in unison. Jonathan held the bat low and swinging slightly to the left but the fear had it’s hands tight around his throat. He risked a look over his shoulder to check for Nancy just as the buzzing started and she turned around and raised the rifle barrel in between the two bats.

‘Wendigo,’ Jonathan got the word out , ‘it mimics, it’s a mimic, call Hopper,’ he forced it out, his throat felt raw. Steve kept the bat up with one arm and used his hand to work the radio on his shoulder and the radio static rang outrageously loud in Jonathan’s ears.

Chief, it’s got us pinned

We’re coming came through in choppy response, like Hopper was already running. The buzzing was louder than the static from the radio now and it kept changing direction.

Jonathan and Steve started walking in a rolling circle, Nancy blocked between them, alternating the rifle from one side to the other as they moved around her.

She had the scope attached now, Jonathan could just make out the green dot from the new site when she swung the rifle down to change direction. ‘Left side,’ she said, voice rock steady, and Jonathan pivoted with Steve, switching sides so Steve could swing southpaw.

Nothing happened right away but just out of range for his night vision Jonathan thought a smudge of darkness looked more unnaturally dark than the rest. And then it moved at the same moment a branch snapped behind them.

Jonathan stayed focused where the shape had been, he'd felt Nancy's arm slide across his back as she changed directions, Steve would have followed suit and Jonathan heard his voice under the buzzing that was still echoing through the trees around them.

'Chief, it's another wendigo,'

Jonathan heard Hopper swear out, *What the fuck is a wendigo* and then it was in the clearing, bigger than the one they dealt with before, a massive gaunt skeleton barely covered with greying flesh. It was hunched over, reaching for them and Jonathan heard the pistol shots before the bullets hit it where its face should have been.

The bat blocked the first swipe of it's arm and Jonathan felt the impact vibrate into his whole body. Steve yelled out 'Rifle,' and the blow from the arm combined with the flashback nearly had Jonathan on his knees, he felt the backs of his legs dissolve and he stumbled just as the arm came back around toward him.

He leaned into the stall and rolled under it. Coming up on the opposite side he lifted the bat and swung it back, aiming at the forearm with goal of breaking through the nothing flesh to crack the bone.

The follow through swung and hit empty air as Nancy started walking straight toward it, site aimed centre mass and she was pulling the trigger in smooth unhurried motions. Its arm dropped and its attention went straight for her and Jonathan's swing hit the dirt.

Dropping the bat, his hands had gone momentarily numb, he took off at a sprint. Hopper was still firing steady rounds into its head but Nancy was about to run out of bullets and that arm was going to head right for her, he could see it in his head already. Steve couldn't distract it forever.

The fire hadn't completely gone out yet, in all the commotion, and Jonathan saw it out of the corner of his eye, still running. Changing direction mid stride he snagged one of the cocktails that had been knocked out of the pile in the array. The lighter nearly slipped through his fingers as he tried to spin the gear but it lit, caught on the rag, smoking as he ran. Dropping down like he was sliding into home plate to get under its arm, he whipped the bottle, aiming for chest height.

The bottle smashed and caught fire just as he ended up at Nancy's feet, the rifle clicking empty in her hands.

He yelled her name but didn't even hear it over the sound of the wendigo screaming. It didn't matter. He was already reaching up and grabbing the bottom of her jacket, yanked her hard to the ground. She didn't let go of the rifle, fortunately it landed next to his head, but her elbow went straight into his shoulder and the pain made him see stars.

She scrambled to right herself over him and for a brief moment their

faces lined up and he brought his hand briefly up and it grazed the sharp line of her jaw. Jonathan wanted to believe she'd leaned into it, just for a second, but then she was looking up ahead and yelling something.

It must have been about the cocktails because they came in a deluge and she was crouching over him again, rifle forgotten on the ground by his head and her forearms braced on either side of his head, using her body to protect his from the shards of glass and sparks that were cascading down from where Hopper or Steve had hit it square in the face.

Her hair was blocking his peripheral vision and all his could see was her face, with a halo of fire and smoke around her. She was saying something, looking at him and Jonathan could see her mouth moving but the buzzing in his ears was drowning everything out.

Then in a flood, every sound came back all at once and he heard her shouting his name.

‘Jonathan!’ He lifted his hands and patted her sides, trying to tell her he was okay without having to speak. Nancy searched his face, eyes rapidly moving between his own like she was checking his pupils and then she was shouting again, ‘Move!’

She crawled off him toward the left where the rifle still lay, empty, and using it as an assist, pushed herself to her feet and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket, tugged him hard and had his collarbone singing in pain.

Scrambling inelegantly to his feet she kept hold of his collar until they were back behind the line Hopper and Steve had created, consistently tossing cocktails at the wendigo

‘Everybody alright?’ Hopper yelled it, not taking his eyes off it. It had fallen to it’s knees now at least but the claws were still swinging.

‘We’re good,’ Nancy yelled back. She was already digging into the bag for more ammunition and reloading the rifle.

Steve landed a great shot and the entire head was on fire but they needed to put it down for good.

Jonathan grabbed the can of gasoline and timing the sprint so that the next volley from Hopper and Steve landed right when he got to the max reach of its claws, Jonathan opened the can and poured it at its feet. Soaking the ground with it.

With new fuel at it’s base, the fire roared and snapped out, catching the sleeve of his coat and leaving a hot scarred line behind. But the wendigo dropped its arms and if such things could moan, he would say that’s what it did.

Stepping back out of the radius of heat that had flashed out anew, Jonathan held an arm up over his face, and the brittle bones of the thing started to crack and snap.

The rifle barrel came up onto his right as Nancy stood next to him, Steve and Hopper her other side to reform the line of defense and they watched it. The spine curved under the heat and it made no sound now, what little flesh had hung from its structure before went to black latex that bubbled and smoked, the smell of cooking meat.

Steve grabbed the bat and broke both arms at the elbows, shuffled and swept the ends into the rest of the mass burning down to bone.

‘We’ll need to bury it,’ Hopper had relaxed his posture now, hat pushed back slightly on his head so he could scratch the hair underneath it. ‘Fire’s not hot enough to do the job.’

‘Let’s just wait,’ Nancy said, rifle still pointed at the charring pile.

Jonathan watched the fire cast shadows over the sharp angles of her face as she said it, rifle braced at her shoulder. Hopper watched her too, understanding, and took a cigarette out of his shirt breast pocket. Jonathan held the lighter out for him.

Bat resting against his leg, Steve held his hands out to the flames and nodded over at Jonathan.

‘Yeah,’ nodding again as he continued to warm his hands, ‘let’s just wait.’

The wendigo burned for two hours.

Hopper radioed out to Deputy Sawchuk and told him to keep up with the search but that they'd need to look for remains, since they'd found the cougar and put it down.

Deputy Sawchuk would take care of the search party and Flo would take care of everything else.

Nancy suggested they dig about five hundred meters away from the fire site, Hopper would need to fill out a report on a campfire that got out of hand but he'd just make Steve write the report so there were no issues on that side.

Nancy was already talking about checking the old masterfile for whatever they had on wendigos after the last time. They shouldn't need to worry about them travelling in packs but better safe than sorry.

Setting the scene for the rogue campsite fire had been straightforward, Hopper already had a few of the discarded beer cans from the earlier perimeter search. Nancy left some matches, used; she'd let them burn down to nearly the tips of her gloved fingers before discarding them by the firepit.

Jonathan and Steve switched out digging the hole while Hopper talked back and forth with Deputy Sawchuk over the radio.

Steve and Hopper would have to keep a close eye on the farms on the forest edge for the next week or so but they could sell the extra

patrols fairly easily. No one wants to believe two cougars could be in the area and the way to make sure that's true is added patrols.

As long as no livestock or person went missing in the next five days, and as long as the masterfile confirmed wendigos were solitary hunters, they should be in the clear by the first week of December.

Every dig and twist of the shovel into the dirt made the line of Jonathans collarbone breath fire all the way up his neck but it was barely causing a dent in the almost overwhelming tide of fear and anger that kept rising in his chest at the image of Nancy walking toward that massive shape.

The adrenaline was leaving his system now and Jonathan used the rhythm of each shovel movement to keep his heart rate from spiking and snapping the tenuous thread of control that was keeping him from just scooping her up over his shoulder and carrying her to the car, driving her far far away.

Ten to one she'd take a shot at his kidneys and make him drop her before he got five feet, but that fact didn't do anything to stop him having the impulse.

'This worked out,' Steve huffed in between words a bit, he'd switched in for Jonathan to finish the grave, 'I mean, with the holiday,' he paused and waved a hand around in the air in a misshapen circle, 'no one wants to monster hunt over a holiday,' Jonathan breathed out a laugh more because he knew Steve wanted him too than because he actually felt it.

Now that he wasn't actively shovelling he had a clear view of Nancy packing up the bags, loading the wheelbarrow. The rolling mass of fear and anger had claws of its own, they were pressing on his insides.

'Hey,' Steve said, getting his attention again, 'it's good,' he was resting his arm on the shovel handle but he jerked his head over to watch Nancy was putting the bear trap that hadn't even been used back into the wheelbarrow, 'we're okay.' Jonathan watched her unload the rifle in smooth practiced motions, unclick the site and set both pieces carefully in next to the traps.

'Yeah,' Jonathan exhaled heavily, 'yeah I know.' Shrugging a bit again, like it would help knock all the other stuff back a notch, at least until they'd clean up, he turned back to where Steve had started digging again, 'Happy Thanksgiving,' he said, and Steve laughed into the hole.

-

Driving back, the air inside the car crackled. Nancy was surprised you couldn't see the fissures in it. Jonathan had turned the radio off, to on and back off again three times while the headlights cut through the dark. It was just softening to dawn and you could see the clouds rolling in from from the south, edging against the grey smudge on the horizon that heralded the sun, however weak it would be that day, starting to rise.

The cemetery went by in a blur to her right and everything seemed to

speed up outside, which just made the quiet inside the car all the more jarring. He was angry, more angry than she'd seem him in a long time. It reminded her of how he'd looked when Will was missing, when his mom had kept saying the body in the morgue wasn't real.

Useless anger that just shuddered and burned it's host.

Nancy didn't know that kind from experience. Hers was always the one that built up like heat in a nuclear reactor until it spilled over and melted everything around it. Hers was the kind you smothered, his was the kind you chained.

She was hardly afraid, the tremors that were grouping around her spin weren't fear. It was like the time she'd accidentally brushed a live wire while replacing a bulb in the ceiling light. Her hand had fisted and she'd wanted to move away while the electricity pulsed through her body down to her feet, but she hadn't been able to let go, frozen in place.

Jonathan paused for a minute when he'd parked the car and she was faced with the unexpected possibility that he wasn't coming inside the house, that he was going to wait until she was out of the car and then drive back to his old home.

Grabbing the door handle, Nancy pushed herself from the car and started toward the porch, determined not to look back no matter what happened. The slam of the second car door didn't ease the trembling in her gut but at least it would be over with. She could feel it.

Jonathan made up ground and came through the front door right behind her. He closed it uncharacteristically slow, turning the deadbolt with great care.

‘That was really stupid.’ Like the deadbolt, his voice is unnaturally controlled. Nancy straightened up from unlacing her boots, pushed out of them while she stared him down.

‘Go fuck yourself,’ she invited, saccharine sweet. He didn’t even look all that surprised, like it hadn’t been able to penetrate the cloud of anger still floating around him.

‘We were all there,’ he started, cut himself off, ‘why did it need to be you first?’ He made a humming sound in his throat while she stared at him, no quick response to the question. She’d been unprepared for any sort of level headedness . She faltered too long and he spoke again, impatient, ‘why does it have to be you first? Always?’ He let go of the door handle, finally,

‘First out of the car,’ a step toward her

‘First through the door,’ another step,

‘First into the pool,’ he stopped directly in front of her but his arms stayed at his sides. That questioning hum came again from the back of his throat.

‘What does it matter?’ confused and feeling her own anger, never far

out of reach these days, start to rise in her chest. 'How is this important,' Nancy tossed up both hands, 'would we even be talking about this if Steve had gone in first, or if you had?' pointing at him now with one hand.

'You know it's not the same,' he covered her hand with his, lowered it between them, 'you know,' he trailed off, looking around the foyer.

'What do I know, Jonathan,' her voice had iced over, 'what?' she demanded.

'I'm not in love with Steve.' He let go of her hand gently and it fell limply to her side, her skin was burning. 'If you finished the upstairs,' he continued, his voice sounded artificially nonchalant, like he was leading up to something she couldn't see, 'you could use the widow's walk,' his eyes settled on hers, steady and serious 'why haven't you?'

Nancy could feel her words just die out in her mouth, and no amount of anger could bring them back, she stood there frozen, waiting for the electricity to travel it's way out of her body into the floor, let her move again.

'Is it not what you wanted?' His eyes flicked up the stairs briefly, 'I thought this was what you wanted.'

'You thought I wanted a house?' Nancy's throat hurt, like she'd swallowed glass. 'It's just a house!' She nearly yelled it.

‘No it’s not.’

‘Of course it’s not,’ her hands were in the air again and she still couldn’t see what he was getting at and the frustration burned alongside her anger, her own fear for him earlier, and she was more honest than she wanted to be when she grit out, ‘I love this stupid house,’ with too much room for one person, too much work, ‘but everytime I start to fix something upstairs all I can think about is how it was supposed to be *our* house.’ And the omission burns. ‘But you left!’ and she does shout now, can’t stop herself, ‘you asshole!’ She spits it out.

Jonathan hadn’t moved, no step back in surprise at her outburst, just steady, eyes searching her face.

‘You wouldn’t have stopped.’ There was grief in his tone and she couldn’t let it reach her, not until she had it out, all of it. Nancy opened her mouth to argue but he interrupted her, ‘admit it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Frustration made it sharp.

‘You wouldn’t have stopped hunting,’ it was hoarse and the words fell heavily between them, ‘you’d have kept going after things first, like always, and it was going to happen once where you were going to be too fast and me too slow and I wouldn’t be able to drag you out of the way in time.’

Nancy wanted to be calm, wanted to hold on to some control, and she wanted it for a whole three seconds before she gave it up.

‘And you know that how?’ The river of anger had crested now and wave after wave pushed the words out, faster and hotter. ‘Are you psychic,’ she jumped in when he didn’t answer right away, ‘you can tell the future now?’

She didn’t wait for him to refute it, ‘ *You* decided this is what was going to happen, *you* decided, and left me where?’ Nancy stepped toward him now, right up into his face. ‘If you wanted out you should have just told me,’ her face felt hot and she fought to keep her emotions in check, ‘you asshole, you goddamn coward!’

Something was about to break inside her but she’d started now and it didn’t seem like she could stop.

‘You should have just said,’ her breath hitched, trying to betray her, but she smothered it, ‘if it wasn’t enough for you anymore’ Jonathan was looking at her like she’d stabbed him, eyes burning like coal, ‘Our *shared trauma* ,’ she choked it out, sarcasm dripping, and his hand reached out so fast, fingers digging under the hair cropped close at the base of her neck.

Nancy counted four pressure points burying deep into her hair, thumb tucking in behind her ear, pressing against the bone and then his mouth settled against her jaw, his forehead a heavy weight against the divot of her temple. His hand flexed against the base of her skull and in the millimetre of space between their mouths she felt him breathe against her.

Air trapped in her lungs shuddered out, hitching, and her hands fisted in his shirt. Nancy pushed him back before tugging him

forward so he swayed into the sliver of space, notching his forehead into the groove between her eyebrows.

‘It was never that,’ Jonathan rolled his head against hers, so close she felt the words on her mouth and their noses bumped, ‘I was scared.’

‘And I wasn’t?’ Nancy tugged again, wanting to shake sense into him, ‘what was I going to do, if something happened to you?’ Flattening out her right hand she trailed it up to his throat where she knew the bruising still had a hold of his skin.

She raised up onto her toes slightly so she could lean further into his forehead, pressing in to make her point, ‘You own the rights to worrying about someone, is that it?’

Nearly crossing her own, she watched him narrow his eyes at her. ‘You wouldn’t have listened,’

‘Maybe,’ she allowed, knowing herself, ‘but maybe not. And we’ll never know because you decided for me. You did,’ voice firm when she could tell he wanted to argue.

Dropping back onto her heels, Jonathan swayed forward slightly with the loss of her pushing into him, she felt him lean into her hands.

‘You can take the couch if you want, grab a few hours.’ He nodded, his hands sliding out of her hair, casually tucking a bit of it behind her ear and goosebumps spread down her neck and all the way up

the side of her face. Something lurched in her chest so hard she nearly grabbed his arm for balance. 'Spare toothbrush is in the cabinet,' she said it quickly, turning away down the hall and into the den, closing the door behind her.

The image of his silhouette, backlit by the witching hour light from outside, followed her into the room, and feeling his eyes like an itch between her shoulder blades. Felt it there when she laid down, like there was a stone under her.

Hugging her arms to her chest, she stared at the ceiling for a long time.

-

Jonathan had nearly come back for good three years earlier. He'd been in Berlin, in between jobs and something had sat on his chest while he slept, paralyzing him.

The hotel was old, boutique and privately owned, not particularly fancy but definitely in between high end and middle class. It had boasted in the lobby that their original structure could be traced back to the late eighteenth century, it was engraved on a brass plate on the wall next to the front desk.

The plate was beautiful with ornately carved borders and florets, Jonathan had taken several shots of it. They were passing through on their way from Turkey, having finished a segment for the holy sites so for the next two days they were in transit. Normandy was next on the list, but the immediate twenty four hours were his to use as he pleased.

Camera strapped across his chest and city map tucked into his back pocket, he'd spent an easy four hours getting shots of the city, common spaces in park with gates that looked like they had been built even before her hotel was a hope and dream in its initial proprietors eye.

The city was built on history, and layered over with modern touches. The contrast of the modern office buildings next to historic sites was something he'd only ever seen in Europe. Indiana didn't have that kind of legacy. Not for the first time, he saw things and wanted to turn to Nancy and point them out to her. The weather vane that looked older than their whole town, the church with medieval out buildings still maintained, gardens being grown and kept around them.

But there were only strangers next to him, or once memorably, a pigeon on an old bench on a cobblestone street. The distance had felt physical, like a tether looped through his bottom rib that got tighter with time. He kept waiting to feel less but it only ever seemed to be more.

Next month, he would bargain with himself, next month it wouldn't hurt so bad, it will have dimmed by then, just make it to the next month. Five years had gone by that way.

And there were days he didn't think about her every hour. But the moment before drifting off to sleep and when he woke up, when his defenses were down and the hiking or the heat or the blisters from his boots in the rain left him with little to no energy to keep the gates of his mind closed to her, she'd slip right in. Her face so clear behind his eyelids it looked like a moving photograph, sometimes he swore

he could smell her; the citrus shampoo she'd used.

He'd fall asleep and dream of her and then wake up with the ache for her a living thing in his chest.

Berlin nearly made him give in.

After Normandy, Jonathan had thought, after that there'd be a break, a month at least and he could go home, he could see her, talk to her, explain. Just see her.

He'd known she was at the clinic with Dr. Sinclair by then, officially. Steve had told him once when he called. He hadn't asked, hadn't let himself but Steve had known. Steve always knew. The silence didn't usually need to sit for very long before Steve would launch into the town gossip, as he called it. He gave updates on everyone but made sure to mention Nancy last. Steve always knew.

Jonathan had sat in the hotel bar with his dinner half eaten and the beer he'd ordered, passing it back and forth between his hands, planning out what he'd say when he saw her again. None of the scenarios he was playing out in his mind seemed to work out, he kept getting distracted by what she might have done differently to her hair.

He ate the pasta half heartedly, suddenly missing the university mac and cheese Nancy used to make in the dorm microwaves with a visceral sort of hunger. She'd added mozzarella cheese instead of the cheese powder, and if they could find bacon bits on sale she'd add those in with finely chopped green onions.

She'd always called it baked potato mac and cheese, which had been a terrible name that was too long and trying to explain it to his classmates when he'd had it in the common room kitchen had left many questioning looks but he'd eaten it every time she made it. Even though he really didn't like green onions.

The pasta seemed bland and soft in comparison and he'd worried over what he would say to her when he saw her for the first time in five years. He expected she'd be angry, she had a right to be. The thought of her anger burning into him, hot words, hot and sharp, didn't bother him.

Coldness is what scared him the most.

The possibility that seeing him would cause no flicker across the stone expression of her face; Cold and clear as glass, had him leaving his beer half full, his meal half eaten. Had him laying awake under the hotel quilt with his gut full of stone.

When he'd woken up hours later and saw his breath fog up in front of his face, he'd thought it was the cold that had brought him out of the shallow sleep he'd fallen into. Until the weight pressed against his chest. His vision greyed out and the next thing he remembered was the team leader knocking on his door for breakfast.

He'd felt like death the whole day and luckily they checked out of the hotel and were on a plane to Normandy the next night. Jonathan slept the whole flight and woke feeling almost normal, but the memory of his breath condensing into fog before he'd passed out had come back to him during the hike.

The local library in Normandy hadn't had a particularly vast section on the supernatural and folk lore but it was deep enough to tell him Night Hags could be killed when they shifted into their animal form, but that wasn't going to help him in France, or help anyone else who slept in that room.

Sitting in the middle of his Paris hotel bed, they flew back to the States the next morning, Jonathan looked at the salt line he'd place along the window ledge, the bottom of the door. He still felt overtired, the caffeine through the day had made no dent in it, and the salt he'd swiped from the hotel restaurant was stark white and there was no ignoring it.

If he went back -

Images of Nancy studying in her dorm, at the fourth of July barbeques dancing, smiling, laughing with her hand held out to him -

If he went back they'd be right back where they were before.

Something would happen, someone would be hurt or have gone missing and they'd be in the car again, Nancy in the bottom of the pool again, Nancy bleeding through his old t shirt with forest dirt and fire all around them.

Jonathan had sat staring at the salt for an hour before he picked up the phone and had the front desk connect him with the travel agent; changed his flights from Indiana to Ireland.

He spent his month break from work walking the cliffs of the west coast, watching the sea change colours and tried to smother the image of Nancy's face with amazing photographs of the countryside, so green it seemed like it was bleeding colour in some places.

The tether hadn't loosened its hold, but he let the tug it brought on at least once a day act as a reminder now and it settled back into that familiar push and pull.

By the time he'd gone back to work, Egypt this time, it had mostly settled back into that old familiar ache. Melting in the desert sun, he'd thought he'd crossed a hurdle.

Brazil had landed in his lap like a gift eighteen months later. The ache had started to grow teeth again and nothing helped keep it at bay like being on a job. Jonathan had accepted the project and decided he'd see if Will and his mom wanted to spend Christmas in Barbados that year. Somewhere warm and with an ocean of distance between himself and Hawkins.

It had been a nice plan, but he should be used to things going sideways more often than not at this point in his life. The cracked ribs and chest wound had been a new variation on the existing theme.

Staring at his reflection in the pocket mirror above the sink in the tiny bathroom, Jonathan brushed his teeth with an orange toothbrush from the bottom shelf of the cabinet. The tether had snapped back to almost its original length and he'd discovered something about the relation to absence and distance. The stretch and pull with oceans of

space in between them had been familiar at least, he spit into the sink and looked down the hall to where the door of the den was closed except for a bare inch of space. It was a whole different ache to miss someone and have them standing right in front of you.

-

There wasn't a proper window in the den, not like the master upstairs with its secret door to the widows walk, or even the guest rooms on the second floor. The den had a narrow window along the back wall, higher up than average and Nancy had never been able to figure out why the original owners had put one in at all.

It gave just enough light to keep the room from actually turning into a cave, but it wasn't low enough to gaze out of, or even really check the weather.

The one thing it managed rather successfully was letting her know when she'd spent the whole night staring at her ceiling.

She'd watched the blue black of night time slowly fade to the deep grey that would get barely lighter by the time her alarm went off. It looked almost white out now, and Nancy wondered if they'd be lucky enough to see snow before the week was out. She'd always liked snow for Thanksgiving, not one of those holiday purists who couldn't stand the mix of harvest cornucopias and sleigh bells.

There was an ache around her knee, and a kink at the back of her neck that shot down under her shoulder blade, no doubt from when Jonathan had yanked her to the ground. Nancy turned her head to

the left carefully and felt the burn of the tweaked muscles travel all the way up behind her ear and down again.

Jonathan had been up for at least an hour, she could hear him moving around. First, there was pacing in the living room, a steady thirty minutes, she'd timed him. This had been followed by him walking carefully past her door and into the kitchen, where he'd been since. Nancy was certain her cupboards had never been opened and closed so carefully since she'd moved in.

Closing her eyes now was useless, she knew from experience, but she did it anyway. The meagre light from the window made the inside of her eyelids look more grey than black and she couldn't exactly close her ears to the sounds trickling down the hallway from the kitchen, but she tried that anyway too.

Tried to wipe out everything she was feeling and just breathe quietly for a few minutes before she had to get out of bed, and she had to get out of bed, she knew she did. Nancy might be able to call out from the clinic again today, Dr.Sinclair would understand, but her brain wouldn't stop spinning and she couldn't decide if seeing patients would make it better or worse, so much worse.

Even when she started to build her wall, she barely managed a single row before she was back in the forest, back in the car, back in the foyer. Her heart was heavy in her mouth, and her pulse was tripping quickly like she'd been running, not laying flat on her back on the mattress she'd taken from her parents house when she'd moved. Not in the den she'd stuffed everything into when she couldn't walk up the two flights of stairs anymore.

Her face hurt, pressure building behind her eyes, and it was only the

knowledge that Jonathan would surely have been able to hear her if she'd started crying that kept her from pressing her face into an old t shirt and doing exactly that.

She'd get out of bed and face, everything, she'd face everything in three seconds. One mississippi, two mississippi, two and half, two and three quarters

Somebody knocked on her front door and Nancy sat bolt upright in bed.

She had the door to the den open and the bat in her hand in time to see Steve walk through the front door, Jonathan holding it open for him.

'Please god tell me there's coffee,' was all he said, kicking his boots off at the front door and walking straight into the kitchen. Jonathan closed the door and locked it, looked over his shoulder at her as he did, before following Steve.

Nancy let the bat fall back into it's place against the wall and exhaled, no hiding now.

Steve had snagged one of the chairs at the table and had a coffee cup halfway to his mouth when Nancy flopped into the seat across from him. There was a half eaten piece of toast in his other hand and he shoved that into his mouth first, chased it with coffee.

‘Barkeep, a double,’ he said, snapping his fingers at Jonathan. She opened her mouth to argue, even had a hand on the table to brace herself into standing, getting the coffee herself, when Jonathan had one of the giant plain white cups she kept in the cupboard over the percolator in his hand, set it at her elbow.

A plate a scrambled eggs and toast followed.

‘Thanks,’ she offered, automatically, and Jonathan nodded. Leaning back against the range he picked up his own toast, pointed it at Steve before speaking

‘So what’s the story Deputy Harrington?’ Steve got more coffee into himself first, took his hat off in the process and set it on his lap.

‘Official story is that a cougar made off with the chickens, the sheep, and Norm,’ he frowned here, they all did, and a moment of silence hung in the kitchen. Steve broke it by clearing his throat, ‘The search is still active, we want to find some sign of him, but Chief is notifying the next of kin today, there’s a sister in Kentucky, we’re pretty sure.’ Shoulders slumping a little now, Steve finished the last of his toast mechanically.

‘And the burn site?’ Nancy asked, caffeine and food hitting her system, synapses firing and happy to focus on what was right in front of her. Some of the sadness shifted from Steve’s face as he changed topics, as she’d hoped it would,

‘I wrote up the report this morning,’ he looked at both of them and his voices tilted so she could almost see the quotes in the air around

it, 'and we found the site last night during the search for Norm, looks like teenagers lighting fires where they shouldn't have and drinking beers they probably weren't old enough for,'

'Teenagers,' Jonathan agreed, scooping eggs from his own plate and shaking his head, 'nothing but trouble.' Steve laughed into his mug before holding it out for a refill.

'The Chief already talked to Doc Sinclair,' Nancy looked up from her own eggs and tilted her head in question, her mouth was full, 'he needed to let her know about Norm and what we may or may not find today.' Nancy swallowed hard and nodded. 'Apparently, ' he continued while Jonathan poured coffee from the carafe into his outstretched mug, 'her exact words for you were that she'd see you on Monday.'

Nancy frowned a little, having the decision taken out of her hands, suddenly she felt like patients would have been the best thing for her today. She stabbed her fork into her eggs and avoided Jonathan's eyes.

What was she supposed to do with herself now?

Steve had finished everything on his plate and carried it to the sink, shoulder checking Jonathan out of the way to wash his dishes. He downed the last of his coffee before rinsing out his mug, turned to lean against the counter next to Jonathan and the look he slid to her while Jonathan poured himself more coffee had her flipping the bird up at him.

Steve clutched his chest like she'd shot him, all while Jonathan's back was still turned, and reaching for his hat he'd left in his seat he

pointed it at both her and Jonathan in turn,

‘Deputy,’ he said addressing her before swinging his attention to Jonathan, facing them again and drinking coffee, ‘Deputy,’

Jonathan saluted half heartedly and Steve was already stepping back into his boots and setting the hat back into place.

‘See you Friday, tell your mom I’m bringing cranberry sauce and you’ll all just have to deal with it,’ Steve called out before closing the front door behind him.

And then she was alone with Jonathan in the kitchen.

‘Did you sleep at all?’ he asked, breaking the silence that had settle heavily between them. Well, it had felt heavy to her.

Not having the energy to lie outright, Nancy made a noncommittal sound from the back of her throat and forced herself to finish the rest of her eggs. He didn’t answer but she thought she saw him nod slightly back, like he’d laid awake too, staring at the ceiling and trying not to think about what had passed between them in the hallway.

Jonathan put two more pieces of bread into the toaster and when they popped up, slightly burned along the crust, he carried one to her plate. Dropping the other on his own he balanced the coffee mug on one side so he could carry the peanut butter over to the table from

where she kept it on the counter space between the fridge and toaster.

They slid the peanut butter between them, putting too much on a single slice of bread and halfway through Nancy got up and poured them both juice.

Jonathan had already brought in the paper so he split current events and obituaries and handed her the former. She spent the next half hour pretending to read about storm that had caused a massive power outage across the eastern seaboard and instead of studiously not looking at him sitting across from her at the table.

She was still angry, that hadn't gone away, but it had a different heat to it now. It wasn't sparky around the edges but it glowed, ember bright in the centre of her. How was she supposed to reconcile seven years of absence, of what had been to her a complete carving out of himself from her life, with this?

Eating peanut butter toast in her kitchen that still smelled of coffee and his feet were bare next to hers under the table.

It was so close to everything she'd wanted and not at all how she'd wanted it that the dysphoria was like looking through one of those kaleidoscope toys that's gotten stuck between one rotation and the next.

Better to do nothing, she thought, eyes moving over the words in the neat newspaper columns without really reading them. So much smarter to just wait it out, whatever this was. He'd never stuck

around before, not since he ripped himself out the first time.

And it was dead now, the wendigo.

Any obligation Jonathan might have felt would be satisfied; he hadn't brought anything back, hadn't led anything here, and what had been here couldn't hurt anyone else. He was free to leave again.

It was only a matter of time.

The peanut butter had turned to cement in her mouth but Nancy had been here before. She knew what to expect and she would carry on with her life, just as she had been doing before he'd rolled back in.

Turning the page over though, careful not to drop the corner into her coffee, she had to grit her teeth against the nagging feeling that was leaning against her ribs. It was small but it had hard edges that had her breath wanting to hitch with how it would be different this time.

How she'd have to use her kitchen every day after and remember how it had felt to have him sit across from her with weak winter sunlight turning his eyes hazel.

For that alone, when he left again, she'd never forgive him as long as she lived.

The taillights of Jonathan's car disappeared down her driveway shortly after and Nancy slid the deadbolt home with too much force and set to work.

Holidays were for cleaning and for cooking so she called her mother first and found out what she could prepare in advance of Thursday dinner, making her grocery list on the small notepad next to the phone on the hallway table.

Green beans and cooked carrots were standard and she could get what she needed from the farm down the road, wouldn't even need to go into town and risk bumping into anyone at the grocers. She really didn't want to make small talk with the cashier about how the search for Norm was going and how terrible it was that he'd gone missing and did you hear the Chief said it was a cougar that had got him, a cougar, down this far, could you believe it?

Nancy could rehearse a half dozen such conversations in her mind before she'd finished tidying up the kitchen and she just did not have the reserves to deal with that kind of heavy interaction, not today.

The kitchen had been easy, too easy, to clean; Jonathan clearing his own plate and utensils, cleaning out the coffee grounds before he'd left. Leaving her with only her own to do, and putting the paper with her other recycling.

She vacuumed first, all three levels, and then carefully climbing on the ladder, used a damp rag on the end of a broom to capture the cobwebs that had started to build up real estate in the corners of the guest bedrooms. She did the master last, but she did it. Resolutely

ignoring the boxes under the sheet and carefully clearing the spider silk from the ornate medallion over the hanging single bulb.

The bathrooms were easier. The ensuite needed little cleaning, having never been used, but there was grime in the two second floor bathrooms that embarrassed her. What if someone needed to stay over?

Using the vacuum again in the powder room she'd start to remove the tiles in, Nancy cleared away most of the debris and tile dust left over from her last demolition session.

Windows were cleaned with the same mix of white vinegar and water that her grandmother used in her own house and she watered the three plants she'd moved inside for the winter. The little primrose bush she'd potted the previous summer wouldn't have survived through the cooler temperatures so it sat in the dining room opposite the kitchen with its large window capturing most of the afternoon sun whenever it showed its face.

Changing out of house clothes, she risked a call to Jonathan's and felt the stone weight of anxiety lift from her chest when Joyce answered. Running through a similar routine she had with her own mother, although with slightly more warmth, Nancy added to the list on her notepad.

Grabbing her purse on her way out the door, she set out for the Wildon farm.

Despite all her planning, she wasn't the only one with the same idea

and she had to park carefully on the shoulder rather than just pulling into the drive like she'd intended.

They had a greenhouse, long and wide, at the back of the property and they grew small stock vegetables year round, with corn and the like kept on the regular summer months.

Nancy managed to get her produce and only talked with one person throughout the whole endeavor.

With the carrots and the green beans cleaned and trimmed in the sink she set about placing them in the casserole dishes. She carefully maneuvered them into the fridge shelves to be cooked tomorrow afternoon before she headed over to her parents.

For Joyce, she was making pies.

The heavy marble rolling pin, another gift from her grandmother, steadily smoothed out the pastry while the wood stove smoked in the corner.

Nancy had a cup of tea in one of her pretty china cups while she cored and cut apples, doused them in sugar and cinnamon while the oven preheated next to her.

The television repeated the news from the living room down the hall, for company, and Nancy found herself humming at points while she trimmed the pie. She went long stretches without thinking of

anything at all and each time she tripped up, she restarted the stopwatch in her mind and tried to make the next stretch even longer than the last.

By the time the first pie was in the oven, timer set, her record was a whopping five minutes forty seven seconds.

Letting the bowls and bakery tools soak in the soapy water, she stoked the wood in the stove lightly, locked it back up tight and followed the sound of the news anchor into the living room and the laundry basket of clean clothes waiting for her hands to fold.

Nancy had her tea with her still and gave herself a moment to just sit on the couch and watch the pre Thanksgiving footage, shots of the preparation for the floats in the Macy's parade in New York filtered across the screen and her tea went onto the end table.

Lifting the closest edge of cloth out of the basket, she started to fold tea towels in practiced movements. The anchor had switched to the weather and Nancy saw little snowflakes cascading across the screen before her eyes started to close.

She didn't even realize she was falling asleep, just drifted off with the half folded towel in her hands and partially in her lap, the voice of the weatherman guaranteeing snow before the end of the week.

Nancy was out cold in under a minute and when the buzzer on the oven announced the finished pie less than an hour later she jerked awake, face pressed into the cushions of the sofa and the residual sensations of cold snow on her face and warm hands in her hair.

-

The dark room in the high school was like stepping into a time capsule. Jonathan walked through the door and he was seventeen again, instantly, for the span of a breath.

Developing the prints wasn't a necessity now that the wendigo was burned and buried, the story of the cougar already spreading out through the town like ivy on the vine. But Jonathan had the film and the time already allocated by the principal, Hopper had put the request in before everything was wrapped up and it seemed a shame to waste it. He didn't know when he'd next have the opportunity or the access.

His next job wasn't until the end of January, Washington for a couple of weeks and then New York, maybe Mexico at the beginning of March. Someone from the Brazil team had blabbed to Ginny and his boss had grounded him until Washington.

Unpacking his bag onto the workstation furthest from the door, tucked back into the corner, Jonathan laid out his materials; checked the door was closed securely and no light pollution crept in from outside before taking out his negatives.

There were a lot.

He worked methodically, moving steadily through solution and pinning up on the line. There were so many he ended up spreading

out all along the back wall and into the overflow lines by the door. Nothing he hadn't expected to see, no monsters hiding in the trees. No shapes where there shouldn't be shapes and no sign of chickens, or sheep, or poor Norm.

If anything, the photographs would be good to add as reference material for the masterfile. Whoever still had it, and it was probably Steve, could add them in. Next time something stalked or slithered its way into town, they'd at least know what a wendigo left behind. And something would. He'd spent the long dark hours of the morning thinking about it.

Caffeine was singing in his system still, the diner cup half empty on the table by the door out of the way, but close enough for him to grab when he started to flag. He'd made it a whole hour laying on the couch in the living room before he'd given up and just stared at the ceiling. Another hour of that had him up and pacing the floor. The pillow had smelled like her.

Needless to say, the adrenaline crash and stress related insomnia was doing him no favours in fighting the migraine that had started to hum behind his eyes as he drove down Nancy's driveway and hadn't moved since.

With only two rolls of negatives left to go through Jonathan took a break and started to mark the drying prints with small lines in the bottom left corner, picking out the ones that provided the best reference material. He'd managed to get some incredibly clear shots of the gouges in the trees, the sun hit the sap in the ones from the Potter's back road and they glittered on the page.

Narrowing it down to about twenty solid shots, Jonathan gathered

the spares that were well dry and placed them in one of the large envelopes that were still kept in the baskets under the workstations. Initialed and dated the corner and marked it with 'recycle'. They probably would be, but he'd let Hopper go through them, show them to Steve and Nancy too, before shredding them. Just in case.

The last rolls were a mix of the second time at the Lewinsky and the first batch of shots from Norms. There were the expected treeline shots and a few of more of the chicken coop, but he'd captured a couple of Steve in the field, a silhouette with the bat slung over his shoulder. And Nancy. With the cold winter sun catching the ends of her hair and her face with it's mix of sharp angles and subtle curves, staring off camera.

He'd shot everything in colour, hadn't bothered to switch out the film for night shots once they'd actually started into the forest, and he could see past the red of the dark room to what the photo would look like in natural light. What it would call into her face, pale with cold and worry, her eyes shadowed with it. Jonathan felt the shudder of his heart in his chest, one long slow shake.

It wasn't a happy photograph, but he was still staring at it twenty minutes later when the last of the prints had dried on the line. He laid it in an envelope separate from the reference shots, the recycle pile, tucked it in with the shots of Steve, the couple of Hopper as well, sealed and dated it.

Moving the small clothespins back into place and tidying the baskets, the trays, Jonathan made sure to leave the room as he'd found it. Turned the light off on his way out. Closing the door behind him, drinking the coffee simultaneously even though it was mostly cold now, Jonathan walked down the hallway, passed by his own locker from senior year. He went out of his way to walk by

Nancy's. Dumb kids.

He locked the doors to the school behind him and it felt like a metaphor. Time to be better.

-

Jonathan's apartment in New York could have fit inside the living and dining room of his childhood home. It was not glamorous, there were no central park views or luxury suites, but it had a small balcony and the extra closet space in the hallway by the kitchen had been converted to a dark room with very little effort.

There was a bakery on the corner that made passable coffee and excellent scones, he was high enough the sirens weren't felt immediately in his living room, but low enough that using the fire escape out his bedroom window would probably save his life. The entrance to the subway was right at the end of his street.

He'd hung a few prints from grad school friends in the living room and there was an old shot of Nancy sitting and laughing on the hood of his car in a brass frame on the dresser in his bedroom. The frame had been a gift from Will that first Christmas after he'd left for New York.

Will had finished exams and drove out straight after, borrowed the car that Jonathan had left in Hawkins, and came out for the week before Christmas. He'd been living out of boxes with one set of dishes and a single skillet for cooking but Will had just laughed and flopped down on the futon in the living room. Asked if they really

could order food from anywhere even after eight pm and started talking about going to the Met the next day but only if they toured NY Hall of Science after.

The photo had been carefully taped to the wall in his bedroom and Jonathan hadn't thought Will had even noticed. He unwrapped the present Christmas morning, alone in his apartment with a hot cup of instant coffee steaming up from the cardboard box he was using as a table. His mom had gifted him with some lights in a care package before he'd left, humour and so much love on her face when she'd done so, and Jonathan had them on, twinkling along the windowsill. The small television he'd gotten second hand was playing *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The card had simply read, *love Will* , but Jonathan knew immediately what his brother had intended to go in the frame.

The frame was in a box now, photograph still protected inside, and tucked into the small bedroom closet in the apartment. His sublet, another photographer he'd worked with before, didn't need to see his sad history spread about the space.

They'd agreed to six months to start, but Jonathan knew he wasn't going back. Not to the bakery, the balcony, or the cramped little dark room. He'd wait until the spring, like they'd agreed to, but unless Gary decided he wanted to move elsewhere, Jonathan was content to wash his hands of the whole apartment. Have his few possessions shipped back to Indiana and let Gary order take out at three am from what used to be his futon.

Bumping into his mom in the kitchen now, while they both tried to run the show for Thanksgiving, had Steve's voice echoing in his head,

the mocking undertone threaded through the whole. Holding his hand under the cold water so the burn on his arm would stop singing, Jonathan listened to his mother apologize and scold him for getting in the way in the same breath, and had to admit Steve was right, if only to himself.

He couldn't live with his mom forever.

But the potatoes were about to burn and Jonathan could hear Dustin and Lucas shouting from the front door, so Jonathan put a cold compress on his forearm and went about saving Thanksgiving.

He'd been nervous and denying it, right up until the point when Nancy followed Mike and El through the front door, that she might not come. The nerves had hung on for a few seconds after too, but she was wearing a dark blue sweater and there was something flashing in her ears and the nerves had been swallowed under the tide of just getting to see her, safe and smiling at his mom.

They'd needed to put the insert into the dining table to fit everyone and even then it was a bit of a squeeze. Watching Steve and Hopper fight to get the leaf into place in the brackets while El gave them directions had been an experience.

When Eleven slid the table cloth and place settings back into order without lifting her hands, Hopper realized he'd been played and went to get a beer, but Steve had just laughed and tossed the cups in the air for her to catch with her mind, rest them gently next to the plates and cutlery and folded warm red napkins.

Lucas and Will had the Macy's Day parade on in the background but they were arguing about the recent issue of something where someone did something else that was completely out of character and there was much gesticulating and waving of their hands. Jonathan skirted around them, collecting empty beer and pop cans, and avoiding eye contact lest they try to pull him into the argument. He'd fallen into that trap before, never again.

Hopper, soothing his bruised pride, sipped at his beer with his feet up on the coffee table, attention drifting from the argument to the parade and back again depending what was more engaging at any given moment. Mike was sitting at the table while El made cutlery dance around his head like a halo and Dustin was in the kitchen chopping vegetables at the table with his mom.

Every once and while he'd cut a particular perfect wedge of celery and hold it up to the light like a jeweller inspecting a diamond. His mom laughed every time.

Nancy was leaning against the counter, pies neat on their trivets next to her, with a diet coke in her hand and a small smile ghosting around her mouth.

He could see now that she'd done something with her hair too, a fancier take on the twist and pin she'd incorporated for monster hunting. It held her hair back from her face so the afternoon sun through the window hit the earrings and sent light fractures on the ceiling, the front of the microwave.

Grabbing a diet coke from the door of the fridge so he had something to do with his hands, Jonathan leaned back against the counter next to her, a careful four inches of distance between their

elbows. When she looked over at him and the smile didn't drop from her face, he released a careful breath he hadn't known he was holding.

It was just dinner, he traced the lines of her face out of the corner of his eye, they could get through this.

-

Snow rolled in before Thanksgiving leftovers had disappeared from fridges and freezers, burying the fields and choking the main roads.

School was cancelled twice before Christmas break officially started and you always knew what day it happened because children in brightly coloured snow gear built forts out of the drifts left by the plows.

Crawling in and out of the cold white rabbit warrens they'd created in the artificial hills, shouting and laughing and sometimes tumbling into passerby on the sidewalks. They reminded Jonathan of Will and Mike when they were kids. Hawkins became the ice planet Hoth, where battles were fought and won.

Storefronts were dressed with hanging garlands and lights, fake icicles and mistletoe in unsuspected places caught more than a few friends by surprise. Jonathan had witnessed the Lewinsky's at the door of the grocery, kissing to claps and cheers from the cashiers, the people in line. He'd been one of them.

The cemetery was a neverending white field. A few headstones were tall enough to peek out over the fresh snow that just kept falling, but

most were buried. Jonathan dug out Barbs grave, found daisies that Nancy must have left, frozen stiff in the wire vase. He placed them gently to one side and then stuck the wire stand of the small cheerful wreath through the vase instead, anchoring it in place.

It was fresh winter greens that he hoped would hold up in the cold at least until New Years, and the florist had wrapped a sturdy ribbon of red fabric around the whole of it, a gold and red bow finishing it off in the centre. He hadn't see Nancy since Thanksgiving.

That wasn't quite true, he corrected, directing his self edit to Barb out of politeness. But glimpses of her walking in and out of the clinic carrying coffees and pastry bags from the dinner, or seeing the back of her head as she walked out of the grocers didn't count.

It was better than nothing though.

'I don't want to hurt her again,' he cleaned more of the snow off Barbs name, 'but I don't know how to,' he trailed off, not even sure how to put it into words. The sky was white with falling snow and when he looked out over the field you couldn't see the horizon break. 'I'm not going to pretend I don't want her back,' Barbs name looked back at him, 'I'm not.' He'd wanted that almost as soon as he'd left, with time and distance now he could admit he'd wanted it all through the leaving too.

'But I don't know how to,' he stood up and paced the few steps available in front of the headstone, 'show her,' he said it like a question and was already shaking his head back and forth like that would stop any reply from coming.

Jonathan stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared out into the middle distance.

When he'd gotten on the plane in Brazil he'd been half high on the painkillers the local pharmacist had given him for his ribs and shoulder and the only clear thought he'd had had been to get to Hawkins, see Nancy's face. There had been very little planning after that point.

The relief from the pain had clouded his decision making skills somewhat but he'd walked out of the terminal in Chicago and right onto the bus and by that point she'd taken up so much of his thoughts that he'd sworn he saw her in every third pedestrian they passed. Her face was there when he closed his eyes.

While he hadn't exactly developed anything past that initial impulse since she'd laid him out in her own hallway, he'd confirmed within himself that he wasn't after her forgiveness, not really. Jonathan didn't care if she never forgave him for leaving, he didn't deserve it anyway.

But he wanted to be in her life, and if she didn't want him to be, she'd have to tell him. He'd leave again if she asked him too, this time. 'And if she does,' he shrugged at Barb, still pacing back and forth in front of the stone, 'if she does,' the possibility was like ice in his lungs, 'well, that will be that.'

The snow had turned from flurries to thick white flakes and it was piling on top of the stone again in record time, coating the wreath like a layer of powdered sugar.

'I'm not going to fuck this up.' He said it into the air, and there was no reply obviously, but Jonathan liked to think he wasn't imagining the warmth that washed over him briefly like a breeze in mid summer.

'Merry Christmas, Barb.'

There was a note on the fridge in his mom's proper cursive when he got home, grocery bags in hand.

return to N!

Nancy's pie dishes sat clean and stacked on the kitchen table, another note, this one with a single exclamation point in the centre, sat on top.

Jonathan put the vegetables into the crisper drawers, the cereal into the cupboard and the bread on the counter next to the toaster. When he'd folded the canvas shopping bag up and stored it back under the sink with its fellows, he leaned against the counter and stared at the pie tins.

His back barely touched the counter before he was moving back toward the front door with the tins under one arm.

Keeping his mind blank on the drive over was made easier by the snow that continued to fall, covering the roads and making the tires of the car work for purchase. Keeping within the lines left from the cars ahead of him, Jonathan passed two tow trucks and one plow

before making the turn onto Nancy's driveway. The neatly shovelled path was already covered in fresh snow but the porch light was on.

Nearly losing his balance once on the steps up to the door, Jonathan adjusted his hold on the tins and reached out to knock on the door.

Something dropped, he could hear the echo of it, and then she was coming down the stairs, feet pounding and a rushed, 'just a second' audible through the door.

It swung open and she was standing there with her wallet in one hand and her hair badly slipping loose from its pins.

'How much for - oh' she looked up from her wallet and cut herself short. 'You' re not the Girl Guides,' she said, after a beat of silence. Once again, not planning has proven ineffective and Jonathan shouldn't have been surprised but her feet were bare and there was tile dust on her face.

'I brought your tins.' He said, holding them out slightly in front of himself instead of reaching out to clean the dust off her cheek like he'd wanted.

'Oh,' she said again, tossing her wallet onto the hutch beside her and taking the tins in both hands. She held the door open with her elbow and motioned with her head tilted to the side toward the kitchen. 'I'd completely forgotten about these, thanks' she said, still talking to him as she walked into the kitchen. 'Tell your mom thanks too will you?'

Following her in and closing the door behind him, he leaned against the doorway to the kitchen, wanting to take his shoes off but not wanting to push too much. 'I will,' he answers as she's turning around from tucking the tins back into the cupboard under the coffee maker. 'Demolition?' he asked? pointing at her face,

'Second floor bathroom,' she shrugged and tried to follow the direction of his hand to wipe the dust from her face, 'well, one of them.'

'The orange one?' Jonathan took a guess. If memory served that was the more hideous of the two, and the one he would have started with.

Nancy nodded, still rubbing half heartedly at her cheek, but he was sure she almost smiled. He caught a glimpse of it at the corner of her mouth before her hand got in the way.

'Want a hand?' He was still leaning casually against the doorframe but every muscle in his body tensed as he waited for her answer. It was one of the longest seconds of his life.

'Sure.' The look she gave him was considering, but not altogether unkind, there was no coldness in it. So he started to toe out of his shoes but she held up a hand. 'Leave them on, lots of shards up there right now on the floor,'

He followed her up the staircase and started to point out her own bare feet but then she was stepping into tall rubber boots, sitting

empty at the entrance to the bathroom, and he closed his mouth.

It was a good sized bathroom. The window faced you when you walked in, shower tub on the right, sink and toilet on the left. There had been a mirror over the sink but Nancy had already removed it, freeing up the wall for clearing the tile. Most of the uninterrupted tile was on the walls surrounding the shower and tub but it was more cream and white. The offensive orange and cream pattern on the left had been her obvious target.

Handing him a scrapper, Nancy went back to work in the corner next to the toilet, working her way toward the shower. Jonathan figured he'd work along the left to end up where she'd started. Shrugging out of his jacket, he'd forgotten he was wearing it, he hung it over the banister and got to work.

Barely two minutes in, Nancy tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a pair of ugly plastic eye goggles, a match to the ones she'd pulled over her own face. After that, they worked in silence for almost forty five minutes. There was an impressive pile of shattered tile shards along both walls and Jonathan could feel a line of sweat making it's way down the centre of his back. He had to switch out his hands more often than Nancy, his left shoulder and collarbone still smarting after too much repetitive motion, but his ribs didn't ache too badly so he considered it progress.

He paused for a second to admire his handiwork and sweep away the debris into the black plastic bucket she'd been using as refuse bin.

'I'm still mad at you.' Nancy didn't even turn around when she said it, kept scraping and chipping away at the tile on wall.

‘I know,’ tile shards poured into the bucket from the dust pan, ‘and I’m sorry.’ The scrapping paused but she still didn’t turn around.

Jonathan picked up his own scrapper and went back to work on his portion of the wall. ‘I’m not here for forgiveness,’ he dropped the scraper to his side and turned to look at her, watched the muscles in her shoulders pull together. Her scraper was still tucked under the corner of a tile, wedged in but not lifting away. ‘but I’m still sorry.’

He didn’t wait to see whether or not she turned around, lifted his scraper and started back in on the tile over the sink.

The afternoon passed easily and when Nancy tossed her scraper into the small box of tools sitting in the tub, there was only the high tile just out of reach around the window left to deal with. There was white dust covering everything in the room. Jonathans hands were coated with it and even when he brushed them off a thin film remained. He didn’t want to touch his shirt, afraid it would spray particulates into the air at the slightest movement, like when you spill flour onto the floor and it plumes into the air like a bomb.

Nancy stepped out of her boots in the hallway and motioned him down toward the other bathroom. ‘Linen closet is on the right and it’s ugly, but the shower works just fine.’

Jonathan tilted his head a little in surprise but followed her out of the rubble and into the hall. ‘You can’t’ and she fanned a hand in the air in front of his whole person, ‘you just can’t walk into your mom’s house like this.’ Looking down at himself he couldn’t argue with her, walked gingerly to the end of the hall and tried not to leave white fingerprints on the door handle for the linen closet.

‘Thanks,’ he said, but she was already heading back down the stairs

and simply nodded back quickly in his direction.

The fan had stopped working in that bathroom, but he forced open the small square window over the pedestal sink, let the whip of cold air clear out the steam that clogged the room in seconds. At least the water was hot, and she'd placed delicate guest soaps out, even though he was pretty sure he was the first to ever use them. They made the whole room smell like steamed lemons.

Jonathan carried his boots down the stairs, damp towel under his arm, and placed them at the front door, next to the hutch he didn't remember seeing there before. He could hear Nancy humming in the kitchen, very low and mostly under her breath, he doubted she realized she was doing it.

Standing in the doorway he watched her pour hot water from the kettle into the teapot, already dressed in it's knit cosy. Her hair was damp and dripping onto the shoulders of her sweatshirt. She must have caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye because she looked up without surprise and jerked her chin out, pointing him down the hallway.

'Washer and dryer are on the left at the end, last door, just chuck it in the hamper.' Jonathan left her opening the fridge for something and followed her instructions. The laundry room was neat and spare, the machines old but looked to be in good working order. There was a cheerful red hamper directly next to the washer with damp towel already resting on top.

Back in the kitchen, she was already seated with a cup of tea waiting on its saucer, and half of what looked like a peanut butter sandwich well on it's way to being eaten. Mouth full, she pointed with the

sandwich toward the bread and peanut butter she'd left on the counter. Jonathan hadn't eaten since breakfast and didn't need to be offered twice.

Not bothering with a plate, Jonathan carried his sandwich to the spare seat across the table and sat down, shoulders aching a little. There was a cup already on the placemat, the tea steeped enough to stand on.

'Finished all your shopping yet?' he asked, tone light and genuinely curious. He hadn't done any, true to form.

'No,' she paused, 'when are you going home?' Jonathan frowned a little, couldn't help it, looking down at his half eaten sandwich.

'Probably when I'm done my sandwich,' he hoped that was the right answer.

'No,' obviously it wasn't as she repeated it, 'when are you going home, to New York?' She had one foot braced on the chair and her knee was tucked up under her chin. The expression on her face was steady, almost cold, but her eyes were sad. Jonathan had to put his sandwich down right on the placemat, put his hands on his knees to stop him from reaching over to her where he knew he wouldn't be welcome.

'I'm not,' he shook his head and tried to get the words out right, 'I'll go there for work when I need to, there and other places too, but that's the job.'

Nancy put her sandwich down too, it hit the plate with a low thud. 'Cut the bullshit,' she said sharply, her cheeks were flushed now, hair starting to dry and the ends caught the light from the window, she looked like the sun. 'Just,' her foot dropped from the chair onto the floor with a smack of bare skin against wood, 'stop. It's only you and me here, you don't have to,' she waved a hand in front of her face, 'pretend.' The word landed heavy in the air between them.

Jonathan wasn't surprised, not really. Leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees, he clasped his hands together briefly, anything to help him stop reaching out toward her. He waited a beat, as much to wait out for anything she might say after as to steady himself. Her eyes were on his face, waiting.

'I love you, I'm in love with you, I never stopped,' he watched the colour drain from her face but kept going, 'I fucked up before and I don't expect you to forgive me but if you want me gone this time you're going to have to tell me.' Pushing himself to his feet he grabbed his jacket from where she'd hung it on the hook, worked his feet into his shoes. 'I want to help you with this house, I hope you'll let me,' he hated to leave when she looked so pale, the hollows of her cheeks so much deeper with the way she was clenching her jaw, but he wanted to give her space. 'I owe you that.'

He pulled the front door closed behind him with a soft click and exhaled heavily on the porch.

When he woke up the next morning, the phone was ringing and his mom was yelling for him to get that for her. Jog walking toward the receiver on the wall he picked it up and barely got out a hello before Nancy's voice was cutting him off 'There's an order of subway tiles

at the hardware store,' she paused and he was afraid to breathe too loudly in case she changed her mind and hung up, 'bring them by after work tonight, you can help me finish the bathroom.'

He hoped his agreement sounded smoother over the phone than it had to his own ears but then the dial tone was clicking in his ear.

Okay, he thought to himself, okay.

-

Nancy had called herself ten kinds of idiot that morning, and that had been before she'd even picked up the phone to call the house. Jonathan had walked out of her door and she'd nearly let herself dissolve right there in the kitchen. The stress and the anger overwhelmed by the aching fissure that had cracked the cold safe place in her chest wide open; tried to swallow her whole.

She'd gone right back up to the bathroom and grabbing the step ladder, tore through the last bit of tile around the window. Her face hot and her throat burning the entire time. When the wall was clear, the knicks on her hands from the tile small sharp pains on her palms, her knuckles, she'd given in and just leaned her forehead against the cold glass of the window and cried.

Afterwards, she felt like the room, scraped clean, and ready to make some hard choices. The place in her chest that she'd kept frozen and safe for seven years throbbed with every breath, and the fissure got bigger and bigger.

If she was stupid enough to still be in love with him after all this time, well, she'd just have to own that. So now what?

Holding her face under the hot spray of the shower, she cleared off the new layer of dust and imagined her crying jag doing the same thing to her insides. Letting the steam from the shower turn the room into it's own pressure system, Nancy knew that the 'now what?' was the same very same 'what' that she'd wanted since the first time she'd seen this house out of the window of the moving car.

Idiot.

She wiped the mirror clean with her hand so she could look herself in the eyes. 'This is probably a huge mistake.' Saying the words out loud helped a little - not a lot, but a little. But she'd be damned if she came out the other side of this as any kind of coward. So she'd risk it.

It was only her heart, after all, and she'd survived the first time. The cracked glacier in her chest stung as pieces broke off around the edges.

'Okay, ' she said , nodding at her own face, ' you're gonna do this, this stupid, *stupid* thing, and then' she pointed a finger into the mirror, 'you're going to live with the consequences.'

You idiot.

It echoed in her brain and for a second it sounded so much like Barb she wanted to cry all over again.

Okay, she thought again, cracking the window in the bathroom and clearing the air, okay.

It took them a week to finish the tile in the bathroom. Nancy had decided at the last minute to leave the original beige tiles in the shower, with its faded white fleur de lise in the centre. She'd stood shoulder to shoulder with Jonathan, a hammer in her hand to start the deed but hadn't followed through. Set against the new taupe tiles she'd ordered from the catalogue, the old beige didn't look so dated and aged.

'It's not bad, without all the orange,' Jonathan had offered it out, tone considering, after she'd been staring at the walls for fifteen minutes without making a move with the hammer. Nancy had turned to look at him, his face blank and avoiding meeting her yes, before she sighed and dropped the hammer back into the bucket.

They'd resealed the edges of the tub, repaired the grout in a few places around the shower head and the taps, but the heavy lifting was over. Nancy called Steve when they were ready to hang the new mirror and it only took the three of them two hours of cursing and re-measuring before it was in place, completely level.

New Year's day was spent staining and sealing the guest bedroom floors, a light, almost natural wood colour stain to bring out the original walnut colouring. Her back hurt in places she'd forgotten had muscle groups when they were done and Jonathan sat right

down in the hallway at the door to the last room when they finished. Nancy leaned her leg against his shoulder without thinking, nearly thread her fingers into his hair when he leaned back, using her leg to stay upright.

The windows were open all over the second floor to air out the smell and Jonathan made spaghetti and meatballs on her stove before falling asleep on the couch while Wheel played lowed in the background.

January was a blur of painting the second floor and both stairway walls and when Jonathan left for Washington she stripped the second and main floor stairs, smelled the solution trapped in her hair for days. Purposefully did not check her calendar.

He knocked on her door the first Friday in February, more stain samples in one hand and his carryon still over his shoulder. Mahogany won out, after brief and spirited debate, even though Jonathan was right, it did clash a little with the second floor bedrooms.

Nancy didn't care.

The first time the sun hit the finished stairs through the front windows, the banister dazzling with fresh wax polish, it was like when the stained glass had gone in. A notch sliding into place.

March break came with cases of the flu and burns from the stove, kids bored at home and falling out of trees. Nancy set sprained wrists into braces, stitched up gashes from bike accidents and Jonathan

called from New York while she made meatloaf, reheated leftovers while it cooked in the oven.

‘Do no do an all white bathroom,’ his voice crackled through the line, the cord from the kitchen phone was stretched out while she dug into the fridge for something, she forgot what, distracted trying to make her point.

‘It’s so small if we do a colour it’s going to overpower it, besides,’ she said, reaching for the ketchup she remembered she wanted, ‘all the magazines are saying white and black are what’s in.’ Jonathan sighed and she would have bet money that he was pacing the hotel room, organizing and reorganizing his work bag, lenses and film checked a half dozen times.

‘Do some black in there then, checkerboard flooring,’ he offered. Nancy closed the door of the fridge with her hip, heard the glass jars on the door knock together. It wasn’t a bad idea.

‘I’ll think about it.’ was all she said, but they both knew at this point that meant they’d be shopping for black square tiles for the flooring. ‘What do you think about a black pedestal sink?’ she asked, just to hear him grind his teeth, she swore she could hear the clack of his jaw coming together. The timer on the oven went as she laughed at his sputtered response, exasperated with her, and it drowned out the buzzing from the stove.

Picking her up on his way back from London, he waited on the porch until Nancy had to yell at him from the kitchen to help her carry the food. Balancing yams on her lap and the two pies in the back seat footwells while he drove them to his mom’s for Easter dinner. Steve rode in the back with his knees hugged to his chest the whole way so

he wouldn't accidentally step on the pies.

'So who won?' he asked,

'Stalemate,' Jonathan said, turning toward her briefly when Nancy huffed out a breath, 'It's dark and there are spiders down there.'

'I got most of them,' she said back, like she had for the past month whenever they talked about the basement, 'it's so much free space.' She appealed to Steve now, keeping hold of the yams in her lap. 'It stretches almost the full length of the house.'

'Yeah,' Steve started to agree, 'but spiders.' And Jonathan chimed in from the driver's seat triumphantly,

'Thank you!'

Nancy stewed in silence for the rest of the drive.

Dinner was loud and Eleven lifted the painted eggs Max had brought leftover from the school, made them dance around the light over the table for most of the meal. Everyone ate too much and not a half hour after pie, bodies were spread out over the living room in various stages of nap. Hopper and Joyce had dozed off leaning against each other on the sofa.

Nancy helped Steve with clean up in the kitchen while Jonathan

answered the phone before the ringing woke everyone. She could hear him talking low into the receiver but he laughed every once in awhile so she wasn't worried.

Grabbing her clean dishes, Nancy carried them from the kitchen back over to the dining table so she'd see them on her way out and remember to grab them.

'We've talked about this,' Jonathan's voice carried from the living room now and Nancy paused, hand still on her plates on the table. 'You should stay, we'll get the lease signed to you.' Looking carefully out around the divider, Nancy watched Jonathan shake his head into the phone. 'I'm not,' he laughed a bit but was still shaking his head, 'it's all yours, Scout's honour.' The person on the other end of the line must have believed him because he was nodding again without saying anything for a few minutes. 'Yeah, we'll grab a beer next time I'm in New York,' was the last thing he said before saying goodbye and hanging up the phone.

Nancy ducked back into the kitchen quickly and caught the dishtowel Steve threw to her, a questioning look on his face but willing to play along.

Jonathan didn't mention anything about the phone call, even when Steve asked who it was. A vague,

'Work thing,' was all that was offered before they were back to washing plates, putting away pans and casserole dishes. Steve brought up the basement again just to watch Jonathan squirm and they didn't talk about the phone call again until Jonathan was dropping her back off at her house.

Nancy opened the door to the back seat to grab the tins from the footwell and caught Jonathan's eyes over the roof of the car, 'Do you need to go to New York this week?' He'd only just gotten back but if there was a job she knew he'd have to go. They could argue about the basement when he got back, it wasn't going anywhere.

'Hmm?' Jonathan asked, reaching into the trunk now for his carryon bag, expression a bit dazed. 'Oh,' he shook his head as if to clear it from the jet lag, 'no, a friend of mine from work is going to take over the lease at my old apartment.' Lifting the bag from the trunk he swung it over his shoulder and didn't catch the momentarily stunned expression on Nancy's face. She schooled it away before he looked back over.

For a minute she'd forgotten that he didn't technically live at the house with her. She watched him start the easy walk up the porch to wait for her by the door and she remembered every time he's come over, or come to see her, he's knocked; he'd only used his key that very first time.

He was going to grab a shower in the bathroom upstairs with the checkerboard floors because they were not so secretly his favourite and he'd drink the tea she made him and if he didn't leave before he fell asleep then he'd spend the night on the sofa in the living room. Like he'd done more often than not in the last five months.

It had gotten to the point where she'd stopped waiting for him to leave and just looked up, expecting him to be there. And he hadn't done anything to make her think he wouldn't be, right there, when she checked over her shoulder for him.

The warmth had snuck up on her so quickly, so quietly, it was warm blue violet in her chest, the colour of her front door, of the little spring flowers he still left for Barb. He was looking at her with the crease between his eyebrows.

‘Nance?’

She cleared her throat and resettled the tins in her arms.

‘Can you get the door,’ she asked, gesturing with her own arms as she started to walk up the porch. The furrow between his eyebrows became a divot and he looked at her like she’d stopped speaking English. ‘My hands are full, can you let us in?’

Nancy watched the penny drop and the frown fell away from his face, leaving it momentarily blank before the smile flared around his eyes.

Jonathan pulled his keys out of his pocket and the deadbolt slide open with a heavier sound than she’d ever heard it before. He held the door open for her and when Nancy didn’t move out of the way, reached his hand around behind her to lock the door again. The lamp on the second floor landing had been left burning but neither of them reached to switch on the foyer light.

The curtain moved gently behind her, Nancy felt it push against her hair, and when Jonathan leaned forward she tilted her head so her forehead could notch into the space between his eyebrows; where the furrow had been.

Shadows made it hard to see but she could feel the smile on his mouth now, where it pressed against her jaw; it curved into the unfrozen sea inside her and the light behind her eyes was warm and blue.

2. epilogue

‘This was your idea,’ Jonathan stood with his arms crossed over his chest, feet planted at the top of the stairs to the basement. Nancy rolled her eyes, already half way down.

‘Years ago,’ she countered, ‘it has been literal years.’ Jonathan stared steadily back at her, and did not move a muscle.

‘So you’re saying the spiders just never came back?’ He leaned his head forward, eyebrows winged up to his forehead, ‘that’s what you’re saying?’ Nancy could not remember the last time she’d seen him this animated about something that wasn’t building treehouses or pumpkin carving with the kids.

‘Fine,’ she gave up, hands tossed out at her sides and she started to walk down the stairs again. She made it three steps and he was behind her, hand tucked into the crook of her elbow, warm and steady. When she looked over at him, his face was set in stoney determination.

‘Obviously I’m coming,’ he grit it out, ‘you go, I go.’ Nancy felt the slow roll of her heart in her chest and she smiled, couldn’t help it.

He made her open the door though, turn on the light, a single hanging bulb with a wire chain.

The basement was huge, unused space that stretched from directly under the kitchen to just before where the car port would be.

‘So you want to put it over in the corner?’ Jonathan asked, voice still unnaturally tight. Nancy studied the dark space over to their left, then looked behind them, under the stairs.

‘Easier to build the walls under the stairs.’ She considered.

‘And you’re sure you don’t want to just keep hiding everything in the trunks of the cars?’ Jonathan asked, hope clear as a bell. Nancy didn’t even bother answering, just started to walk around the stairs to get a better gauge of space. Ideas about shelving for ammunition and the racks for the rifles, the bats, already forming in her mind. ‘It’s worked well so far,’ he said slightly under his breath.

The phone started to ring from upstairs and Jonathan had her hand in his, already starting up the stairs again before the second ring echoed down to them.

It was after bedtime, so little ears were well tucked in for the night but years of habit were hard to break and both of their steps were quick and light toward the closest phone in the kitchen. Jonathan reached it first, hand still linked with hers.

‘Yeah?’ he answered, odds pointing to only one caller this late at night, and they didn’t require manners. Nancy leaned forward and up onto her tiptoes as Jonathan tilted the receiver toward her to

listen.

‘Max is on her way over,’ Nancy caught the end of Steve’s sentence as it crackled through the phone, he must have been in the car, ‘something moving over by the quarry, complaints of lights in the water,’ Jonathan looked down at his watch and then met her eyes with their heads still close together,

‘Twenty minutes,’ Jonathan pauses slightly before adding , ‘wait for us to get there,’ in the dad voice he swears up and down isn’t a real thing.

In the ten minutes it takes for Max to get to their door, moving slow and her belly walking through the doorway first, Nancy has her jacket pulled on over the well worn knife belt and Jonathan was grabbing the bat from where they tucked it behind the hutch in the foyer.

Nancy leaned forward to kiss Max on the cheek, ‘No excitement while we’re gone okay?’ she says it more toward the bump under Max’s ancient U of Chicago sweatshirt. Max just scoffs and pushes her hair away from her face, shoves them toward the door.

‘Go on already,’ she said, rolling her eyes at Jonathan bending down to kiss her other cheek as she grabbed the door to close it behind them, ‘and be careful.’

The light from the kitchen set her hair on fire as she waved them off, Nancy backing out of the drive with one hand on the wheel, one on the radio.

Jonathan turned the dial to their channel and Steve's baritone filled the car

Ready or not, here I come, you can't hide

Nancy hit the button to step over him on the line, 'five minutes out, don't be dumb, over.'

Steve came back almost immediately with a , *Roger that Deputy B*, before dropping back into the chorus seamlessly. Nancy set the handheld back down, but they left him humming low through the radio.

Jonathan reached over in the dark, plucked her hand off where it rested on the gearshift and linked their fingers together, lining the old scars up out of habit.

The glow inside her was the iron spikes of the bat on his shoulder, streetlights catching on the grey in his hair, the bronze of his eyes that he gave to their kids. Nancy squeezed his hand, pressed their palms tight together and let the speedometer glide all the way up.

The sky was black velvet stretched out before them and there was a monster to hunt.

You go, I go, she thought, with his pulse beating against her hand, her heart.

